

KING KONG LIVES!

THAT'S ONE BIG MONKEY. PAGE 32>

PREVIEWED INSIDE: GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER, BLACK & WHITE 2, THE ELDER SCROLLS IV: OBLIVION, STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II, AND MORE!

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

The PC Gaming Authority

20 YEARS
ISSUE 256

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

BUH-BYE, WINDOWS XP!

HANDS-ON WITH VISTA, MICROSOFT'S NEW OS

INSIDE: GHOST RECON
BACK FROM THE DEAD.
PAGE 62>

ONLINE GAMING'S NEXT BIG THING

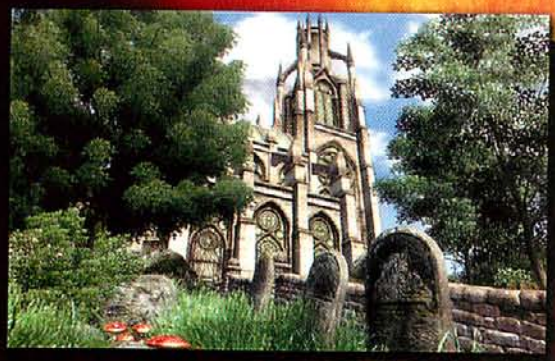
HUXLEY

MMOFPS. UNREAL ENGINE 3. ENTIRELY KICK-ASS.
WORLD-EXCLUSIVE REPORT.

ONLINE IDIOCY— WE LOVE IT!

WOW RAP MUSIC, STUPID BATTLEFIELD 2 TRICKS, AND AN INTERVIEW WITH LEEROY JENKINS!









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– Game Critics Award, GameSpot, IGN, GameSpy, Xbox Evolved, Console Gold, Daily Game, Games Domain

"Oblivion is, at this time, the best-looking game I have ever seen in my life."

– Xbox.com

"The biggest title for the Xbox 360™, and the one I'm most looking forward to."

– GamePro Magazine

"One look at Oblivion will shatter your conceptions about what is possible in a video game."

– GameInformer

The RPG for the Next Generation

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RP
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
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XBOX 360

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Cutlery

www.peacefulgod.com

BLACK & WHITE 2

Destructive

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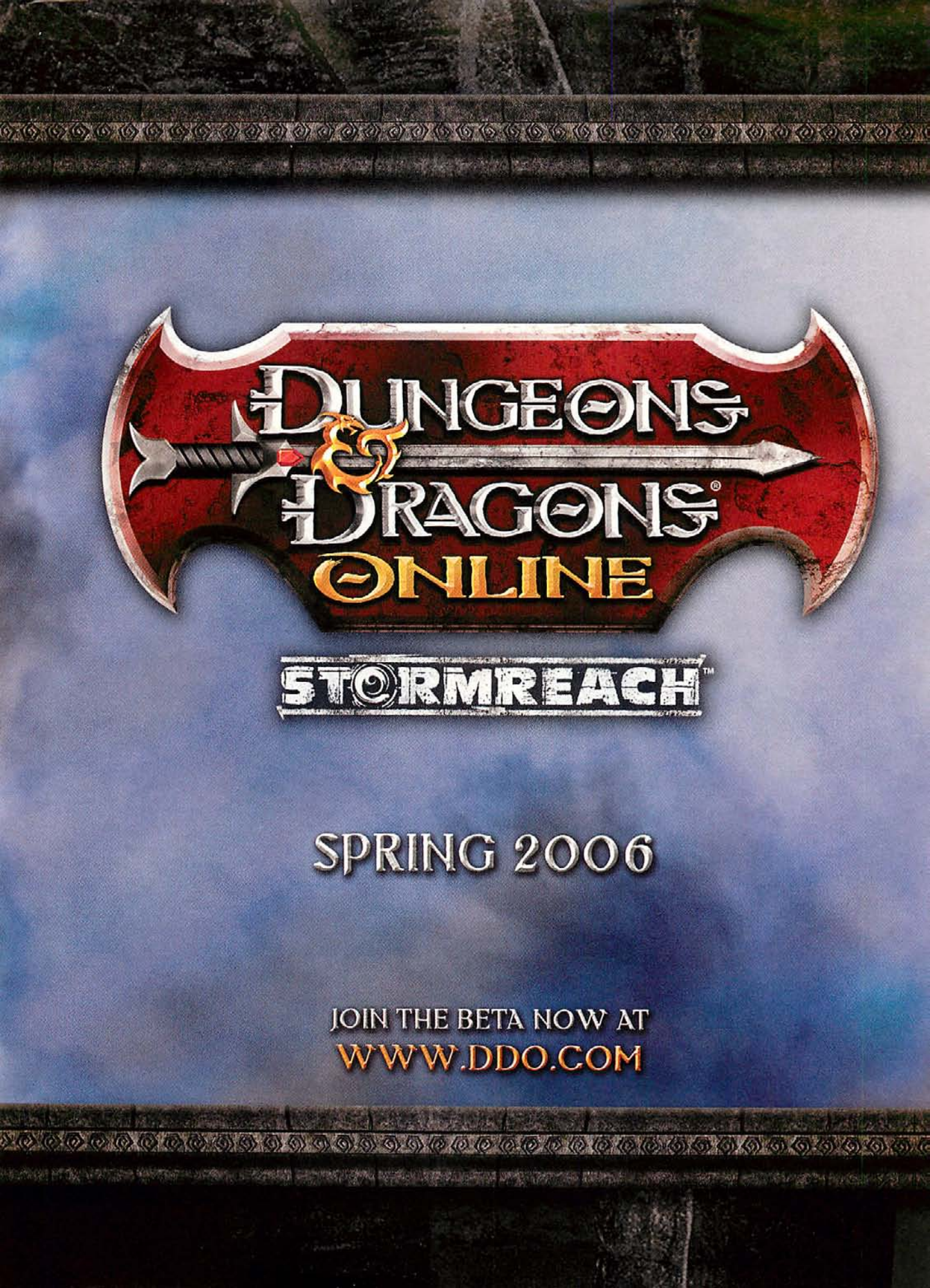
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Crude Humor
Use of Alcohol
Violence

THE MOST ANTICIPATED UPCOMING MMO.

SOURCE: IGN VAULT MMO STUDY, JUNE/JULY 2005

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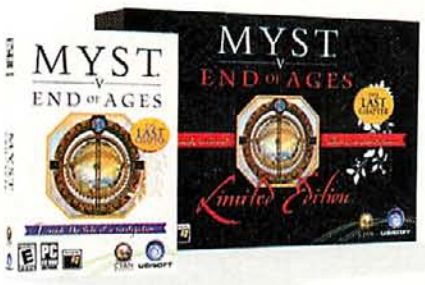
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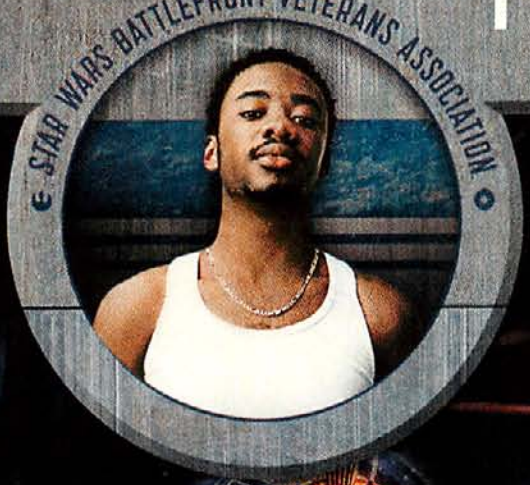
Games for Microsoft® Windows®

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STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

TEEN T Mild Language Violence ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

Game Experience May Change During Online Play.

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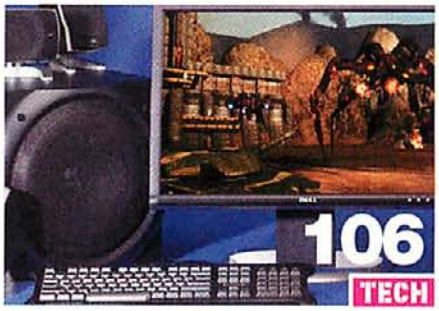
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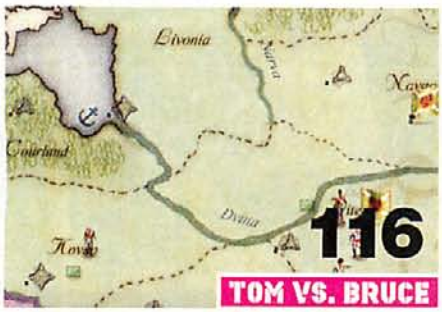
122 Scorched Earth
My buns demand both hands!













THIS MONTH ON 1UP.COM

GROGNARDS.1UP.COM
If *CGW* contributor Bruce Geryk's new war-game column isn't enough for you, check out his 1UP page for even more hardcore strategy-gaming discussion.

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Blood
Mild Language
Violence
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XBOX 360

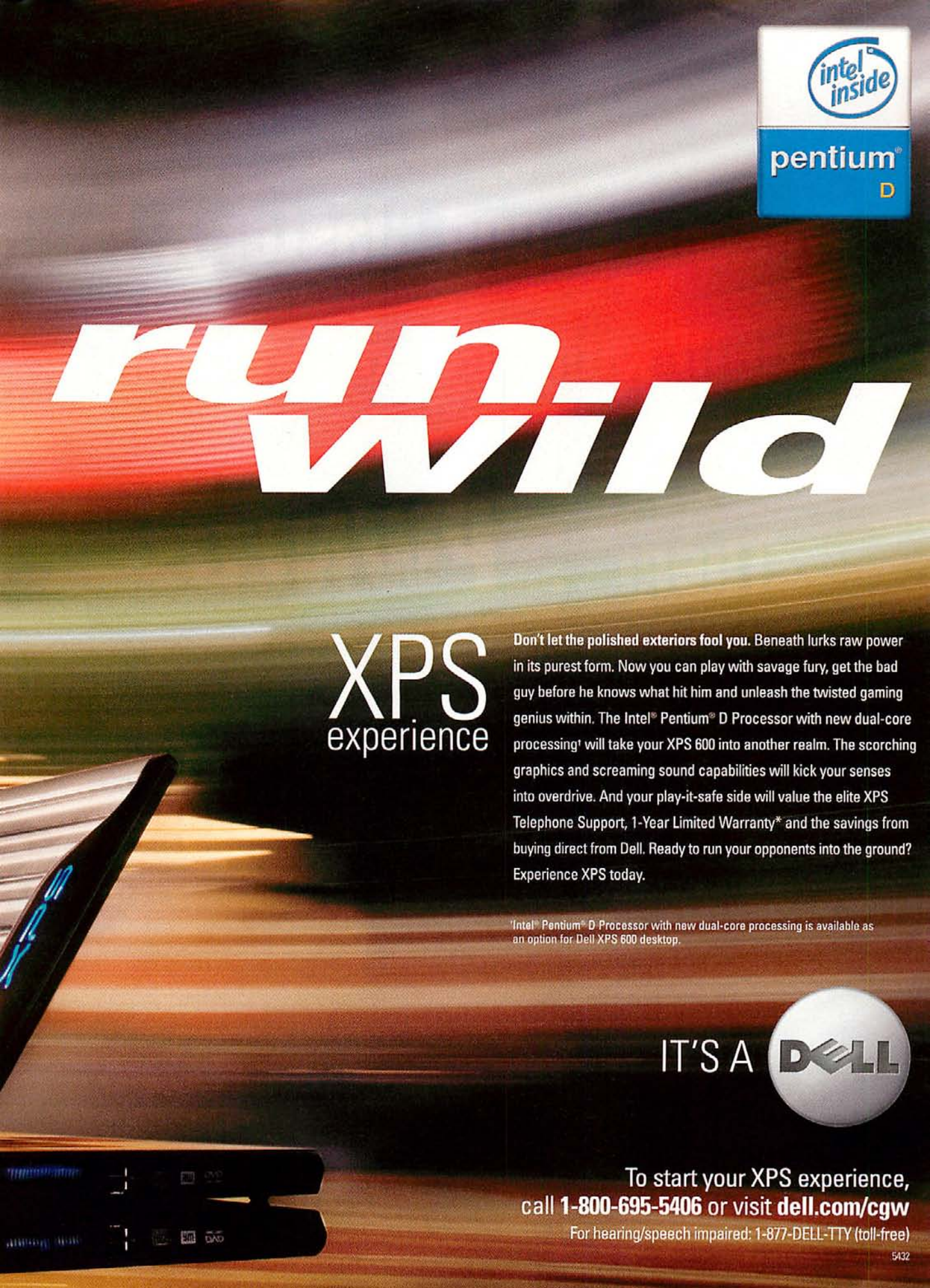
Infinity Ward

ACTIVISION

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CREATIVE

EDITORIAL 256

ONE LOVE

One addict asks: Do I really need more games?



UGH. ANOTHER NIGHT, ANOTHER FOUR FREAKIN' hours in *World of WarCraft*. It's ridiculous. Someone disable my account—please. (Um, not really. Ha ha!) I have a huge pile of new games to play, and I haven't played any of them because I cannot get myself to stop playing *WOW*. The only exception at all is the game that I was forced to play because I was reviewing it this month—*Dungeon Siege II*. And though I liked the game to some extent, I still felt at times while playing it that I was "wasting time" that could have been better spent in my "real" game—*WOW*.

I know I'm not alone. I know that many gamers let all their game time get absorbed by a single title. This has been the case for forever, but it's even worse now with the MMOs, since the monthly fee of most of these games simply demands a certain commitment. It's like a gym membership that way.

And not to start this issue off with any nervous hand-wringing, but I wonder: Is this good for gaming? Will games become less "disposable" if we all stick with certain titles for months or even years on end? What does that mean for the future? How do new titles even stand a chance?

This is what I am wondering as I look at the cover of this issue, which features the amazing-looking *Huxley*. Never mind the time commitment. Just how many monthly fees is any one gamer willing to pay? How many different characters in how many different games am I willing to devote to leveling up? I'm getting tired just thinking about it. That doesn't mean I'm not psyched for *Huxley*, or any of the other games coming down the pike. It just means that I need to clone myself, win the lottery, freeze time, or maybe all of those at once.

Why must my life be so hard?

JEFF GREEN EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

"The sun's not yellow. It's chicken."
Now Playing: Bob Dylan's "Tombstone Blues"; *World of WarCraft*
1UP.com Blog: cgwjeff.1UP.com

OUR DEFINING SONG LYRICS



KRISTEN SALVATORE
MANAGING EDITOR

"Everything is going up.
Everything is going as planned.
Everything moves along.
Everything is fine, fine, fine."
Now Playing: Soul Coughing's "The Idiot Kings"; down her role
1UP.com Blog: kristenss.1UP.com



DARREN GLADSTONE
SENIOR EDITOR (FEATURES)

"Beat on the brat, beat on the brat,
Beat on the brat with a baseball bat—
Oh yeah, oh yeah!"

Now Playing: The Ramones' "Beat on the Brat"; *Battlefield 2*
1UP.com Blog: cgw_gizmo.1UP.com



RYAN SCOTT
EDITOR (REVIEWS)

"Damn, it feels good to be a gangsta."

Now Playing: *Office Space* soundtrack; *Shattered Union*
1UP.com Blog: cgw-ryan.1UP.com



SHAWN ELLIOTT
EDITOR (PREVIEWS)

"Lights flicker on the frame of a light sleeper,
Watching sports in a stained wifebeater and boxer shorts."
Now Playing: Sage Francis' "Kiddie Litter"; *Battlefield 2*
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LOGAN PARR
DISC PRODUCER

"Has anybody seen a dog dyed dark green? About two inches tall, with a strawberry blonde fall,
Sunglasses and a bonnet and designer jeans with appliques on it?"
Now Playing: B-52s' "Quiche Lorraine"
1UP.com Blog: logans_run.1UP.com



MICHAEL JENNINGS
ART DIRECTOR

"And then after the smoke is cleared,
Me and KG will peek out our heads.
We've been watching the riots
On a monitor 20 floors below sea level, from a bunker."
Now Playing: Tenacious D's "City Hall"
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SEAN DALLASKIDD
ASSOCIATE ART DIRECTOR

"Mírate a ti mismo. Enfréntalo.
¿Qué pasa contigo mi hermano?
Ven, animate ¿Qué pasa contigo?"

Now Playing: Gorillaz' "Latin Simone"
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WHEN A LEADER MUST STEP INTO THE LIGHT.

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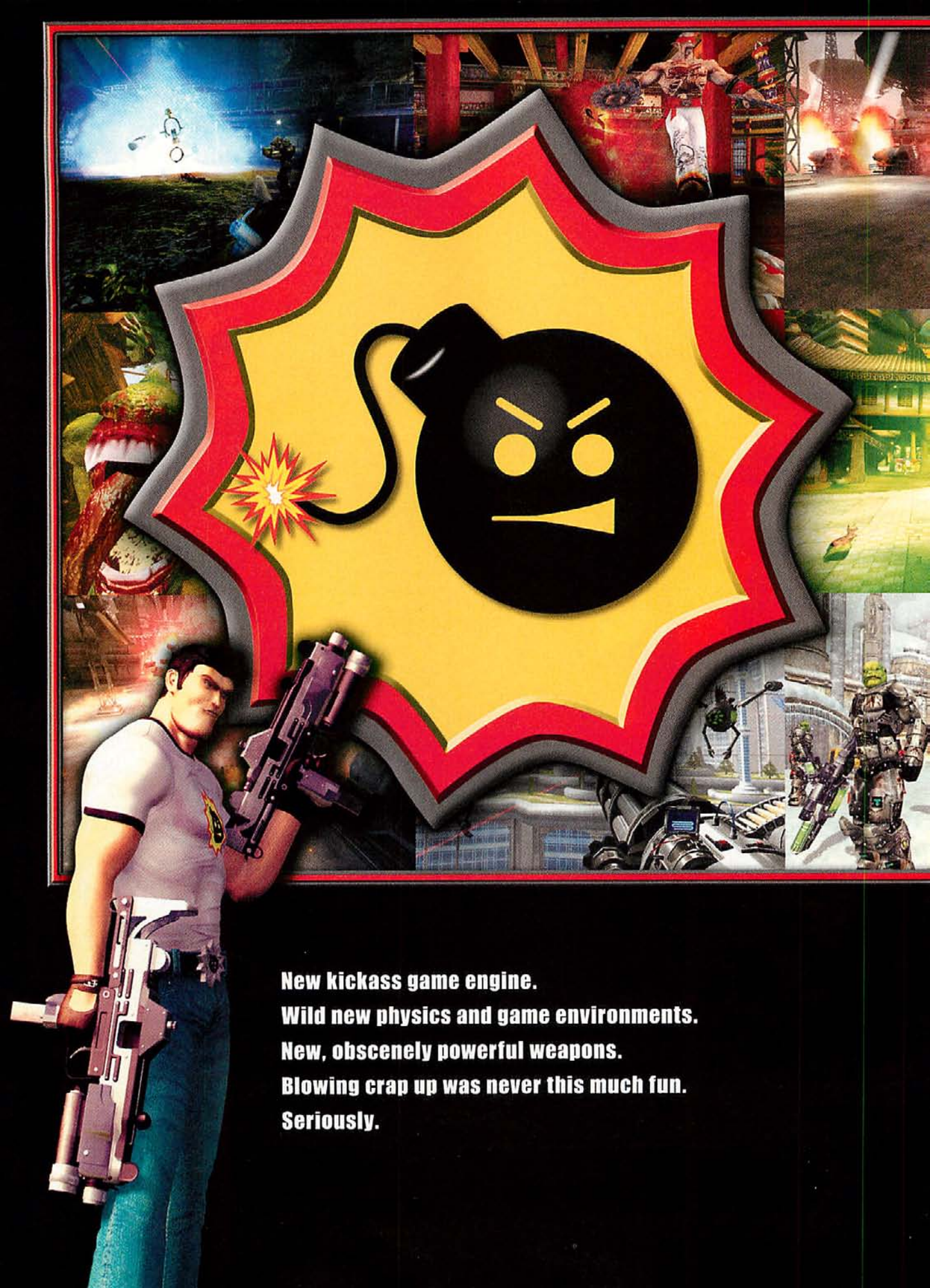
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LETTERS

ISSUE 256

AND THEY SAY GAMERS CAN'T READ!



EPISODIC SKEPTIC

I love Valve. It made two of my all-time favorite games, which foster an environment that allows users to create multiplayer mods like *Counter-Strike*, *Day of Defeat*, and *Natural Selection*. I like Steam, too—when it works.

I do not, however, like the idea of episodic gaming. [Valve cofounder] Gabe Newell likens games as they are now to film, and then compares episodic content to television. I see it more as a means of milking customers for all we're worth. Depending upon the pricing structure and how long the episodic game goes on, we could pay $50, $100, even $200 for one game. So now are normal games going to become like MMOs as far as pricing goes? All I have to say is: "F*** that!"

Dan Lindberg

STILL STEAMED IN IRAQ

Editor-in-Chief Jeff Green's editorial "Still Steamed?" (*CGW* #255) struck a nerve with me. I bought *Half-Life 2* on an online auction site because I got deployed to Iraq (I'm still here), and I soon found the Achilles' heel of the program upon installation. Due to the necessity of Steam, I have not yet been able to play the game because I have no Internet connection. Why the hell does Valve even bother to print CDs if it's going to force-feed us an online download anyway? Not everyone has convenient Internet access, and I, for one, will be very cautious when considering buying another Valve product.

Don Finnell

Senior editor Darren Gladstone responds: It's a pain, but you can play *Half-Life 2* without Steam. It just requires some extra grunt work. First, unfortunately, you still need to find a broadband connection somewhere in the DMZ. Go online to unlock the game files, checking off the "Remember my password" box. Next, right-click on the game in the Launch menu and make sure it says "100% acquired, ready for offline." Then right-click on the Steam icon in the System Tray. In Settings, uncheck "Do not store account information on this computer." Once disconnected from the Net, you'll be able to start in offline mode.

GEEKTIONARY



What game features do you guys talk about the most? That's right: graphics and physics. Well, guess what? I made up a new word for us and our fellow geeks: "graphysics." Run with it. It'll save you some space per use and tons of ink in the long run. And no need to thank me, ladies and gentlemen—it's just my humble way of giving back to the gaming magazine that's given us so much.

Chinedu Opara

Chinedu, we're with you. In fact, we're considering following the bold trends of *DRIV3R* and Fatal1ty: All vowels are numbers now! Gr4phys1cs! W00t! Daniel Webster is banging his head against a wall somewhere this very minute.

PC GAMING ISN'T DEAD, DAMMIT!

I don't read PC-only gaming magazines too often, but whenever I do, I always see editorials ranting about how PC gaming isn't dying or complaining about how some elitist somewhere said otherwise. I don't think too many gamers really worry about this—we're too busy enjoying the games we're playing!

You're giving too much free publicity to the doomsayers. By continuously bringing it up, you're only making the casual crowd think that there's some truth to this stuff. Some things do go away if you simply ignore them.

Paul

OK, OK. You're right. Complaining too much about the nondeath of PC gaming is like standing in the playground as a kid and saying, "I'm not a nerd! I AM cool! Sniff." Not that we ever did that.

WHO'S THE PARIAH NOW?

There's a problem with your "Pop Culture Pariah" story from *CGW* #255: The premise that the news media still has credibility. With the information age really hitting its stride, the distortions made by the mainstream media get exposed more every day. Don't worry about the media. Just keep your integrity and I'll

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"THE DISTORTIONS MADE BY THE MAINSTREAM MEDIA GET EXPOSED MORE EVERY DAY." –STEPH FORTIER

MAIL BYTES

Is it me, or does Editor-in-Chief Jeff Green look like an older David Duchovny?
—SpicyMuffin

U guys are the PC GAMING AUTHORITY!!!!!!! YA!!!!!!!!!! U GUYS RULE!!!!!!!!!
—Yogi K.

Is [*CGW* columnist] Robert Coffey even capable of nonhate?
—William Hollar

The new look is refreshing. It's almost like having an extra cheese slice on the burger.
—Joe

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keep buying your mag...unless I see that Lenin guy on the cover again. Those glasses don't fool me.

Steph Fortier

I was disappointed by the lack of depth in John Davison's article "Pop Culture Pariah." It was a game cheerleading piece, but it offered no real critique on the current trend toward explicit violence in the gaming industry.

Do videogames provoke criminal behavior? Probably not to any great extent, as your chart appears to show. But game developers are reaching into some very dark places and they are desensitizing gamers to extreme cruelty, sexism, and violence.

CGW has taken a stand in the past against extreme violence in games. I trust you guys, and in the future, I expect a deeper analysis of this issue than what I found here.

David Enna

A NECROLITHID BY ANY OTHER NAME

My brother Jake and I think Tom vs. Bruce is so great that we decided to name our *Dungeon Siege II* pets after them. Bruce is my level 29 dark naiad, and Tom is my brother's level 29 necrolithid. Just thought you should know.

Cole Holtgard

That's...great, Cole. Just do us a favor and don't name any pack mules after us, OK?



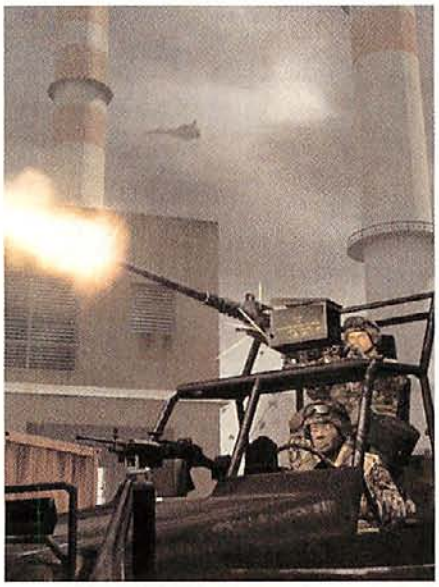
SEVENTEEN STARS FOR RIDDICK

Reading writer Robert Coffey's "Scorched Earth" in *CGW* #254—the one in which he complains that all movie-licensed games turn out to be total garbage—made me stop and think about how many movie-based games have actually been good.

Case in point: *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay*, which is possibly one of the best and most innovative first-person shooters since the original *Half-Life*. Please—for the sake of all of us who have bought a good movie-based game—lighten up, will ya?

Kyle W.

You're right—we were way too hard on *The Chronicles of Riddick*, our five-star, 2004 Action Game of the Year winner. It'll never, ever happen again, Kyle. In fact, consider this our public apology.



REVIEWING THE REVIEWS

I enjoyed your well-written review of *Battlefield 2*—and I didn't even intend to play the game. I'd like to see more in-depth reviews of highly rated games! I do have a question, though. I noticed that *Stronghold 2* (a two-star game) got two pages, and *Fantastic 4* (a two-and-a-half-star game) got a full page. Between these two reviews were *FlatOut* (four stars) and *TrackMania Sunrise* (also four stars). My question is: Why were two lesser games given so much magazine space? If *CGW*'s focus is to promote superior games, why not give the extra space to the higher-rated games?

Steve Broesder

Reviews editor Ryan Scott responds: You raise some really good points here, Steve. What it really boils down to is, we have no idea how good or bad a game is going to be when we assign word counts to our writers. Some games (like *Battlefield 2*) are reasonably safe bets, but a lot of games end up being great, even though there might not be much hype behind them. On the flip side, some high-profile games turn out to be real stinkers. We try to use our best judgment as to what our readers are looking forward to, and that's essentially how we arrive at our coverage decisions. Just try to remember not to pass over those smaller reviews—in the words of Yoda, size matters not.

I've been a faithful reader of *CGW* since Issue #1. It used to be a top-quality, well-written magazine with writers like Scorpia, who gave thorough, balanced reviews of games. Even if they hated a game, they gave specifics about what was wrong with it, what was needed to fix it, and what worked.

You have forgotten why people buy the magazine, which is for the reviews! The rest is just fluff. In Issue #255, there are 64 pages of previews and ads before the first review. There are a total of seven pages of reviews covering nine games, followed by 10 pages of hardware.

Even if all the games were bad, which I doubt, there should have been a minimum of a page of text describing their flaws and good points.

Julian Biggers

Reviews editor Ryan Scott responds: In your zeal to get to the reviews section in Issue #255, you blew past the intro page, entitled "The Dry Season." The reason there weren't very many reviews in that issue is because...well, there just weren't very many games coming out. Blame the game publishers, who save up most of their releases for the profitable holiday season. Starting with next issue, you'll probably find yourself wondering where all the previews went as all the big reviews come pouring in. And what's that about the rest of the magazine being fluff? Take a gander at our behind-the-scenes look at Valve Software, and *then* you can talk to us about fluff.



DRINKING THE KOOL-AID

I've been playing PC games for over a decade, and up until now, I was able to resist the scourge that is the MMORPG. But thanks to you, your reviews, and your free *City of Heroes* trial on the July/August DVD, I'm addicted. Thanks a lot.

Eric

Your first taste is always free!

GOING POSTAL

First off, I love your magazine. My only complaint is this: Why is it that when I receive my new issue, the magazine looks like somebody threw it in a puddle and ran over it with a car? Do you people have anything to do with this? Maybe I should get ahold of my mailman and yell at him, because it's probably him who reads my magazine each month. I'm surprised he doesn't steal my demo CD, too!

Zach Geisel

If it's any consolation, we only do it to your issues, Zach.

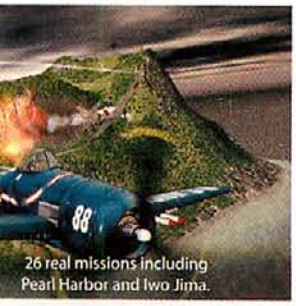
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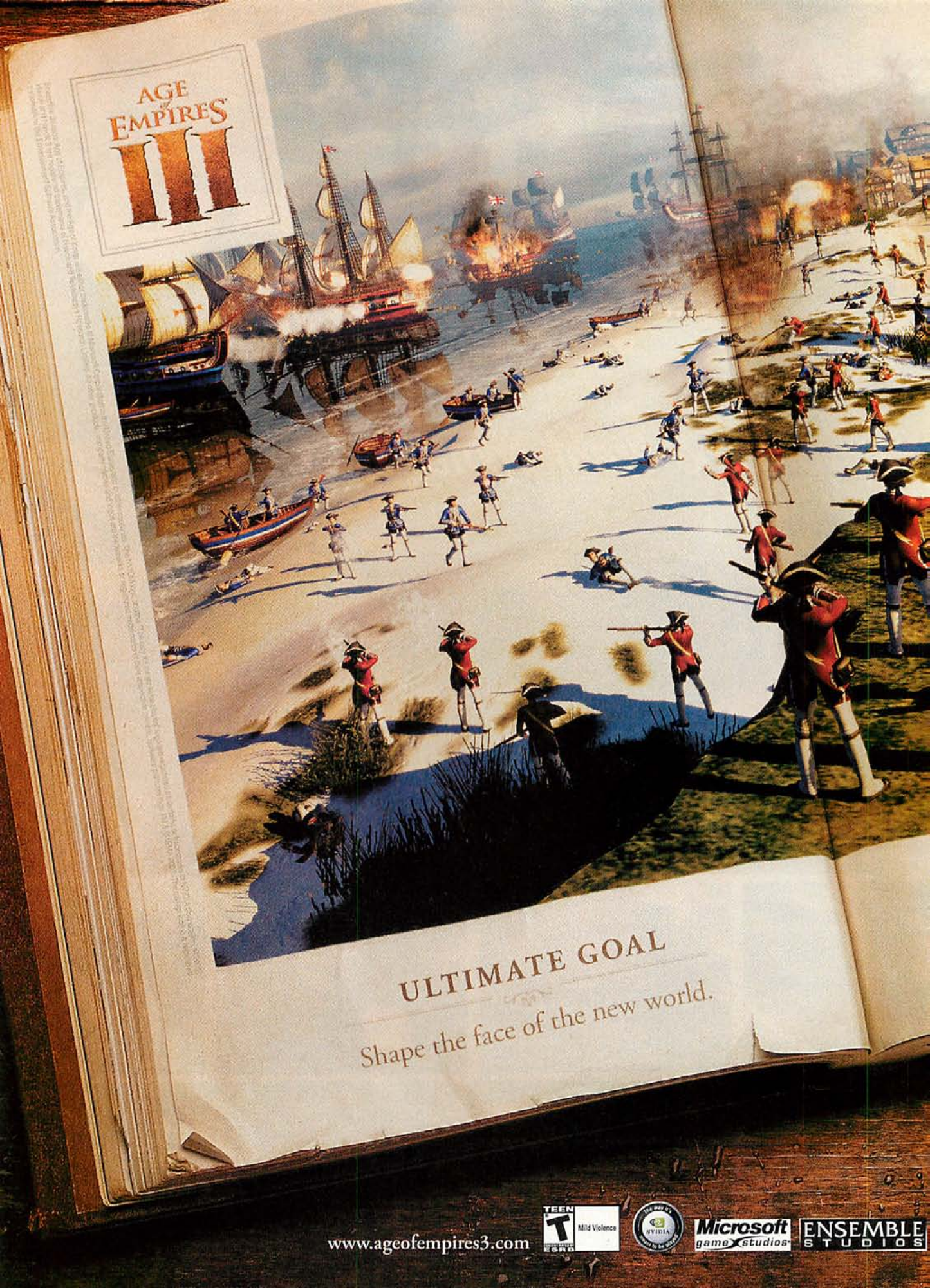
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Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language
Use of Drugs

XBOX

PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE

SURREAL

PlayStation.2

KING KONG

...and you smell like one, too!

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Ubisoft** GENRE: **Action-adventure** RELEASE DATE: **November**

EXCLUSIVE SCREENS

THE THOUGHT OF ANOTHER KING KONG movie should not excite us, but since it's being made by *Lord of the Rings* übergod Peter Jackson, we are hot and bothered in the extreme. Our expectations would also be low, in theory, for the inevitable *King Kong* videogame, but again, the creative force behind the project gives us hope. In this case, it's French designer Michel Ancel, the man who created Ubisoft's outstanding *Beyond Good & Evil*, and the man Peter Jackson handpicked after Jackson played that game.

Getting screens and info out of Ubisoft is harder than taking down the big ape himself, but we did manage to snag this awesome shot of Kong battling a giant bat. That's you playing as the king of swing, by the way (the other half of the game puts you in control of human hero Jack Driscoll in a first-person perspective). Would you like a banana? / **Jeff Green**



▲ The audition line for *Jurassic Park 4*.

INSIDE



38

NEWS

Young Guns

How three friends plan to take on *Quake* and *Unreal* with a game engine they built.



50

COLUMN

Public Access

Did you know that they have the Internet on computers now?! It's our new monthly column on online gaming high jinks. Yay!



62

PREVIEW

Ghost Recon: Advanced Warfighter

The name is so long, we ran out of room. Just read it!



GOING APE

We haven't been this excited about simians since *Every Which Way But Loose*. Check back next month, as you'll get to see a whole lot more of Peter Jackson's movie—and the game.

THE ELDER OBLIVION

Massively single player

PUBLISHER: **2K Games/Bethesda Softworks** DEVELOPER: **Bethesda Softworks** GENRE: **RPG** RELEASE DATE: **Late 2005**



PREVIEW

THE PC MARKET DOESN'T SEE MANY good single-player RPGs these days. Diablo-style action-RPG hybrids continue to gain in popularity, and the mainstream acceptance of massively multiplayer online games has ensured you'll never have to play alone again. Meanwhile, the *Baldur's Gates* and *Elder Scrolls* of the world remain fond but increasingly distant memories. Fortunately, a few publishers still understand the unique and immersive appeal that traditional RPGs provide. First-person RPG *The Elder Scrolls III: Morrowind*, which came out in 2002, is undoubtedly the best recent example of what can be done with the genre, and developer Bethesda Softworks is well aware of that, as executive producer Todd Howard and his team have dedicated the last three years to the series' next epic chapter: *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*.

"[We've] really set out to create the RPG for the next generation of hardware...[and] of videogames," Howard explains. "[We looked] at everything we'd done with *Morrowind, Daggerfall,* and *Arena*, as well as what else was happening in our industry, and figured out what we could do to move RPGs, and videogames in general, forward. We wanted to make sure every aspect of the game was improved, whether it was starting from scratch or just tweaking and tuning. The big things were the A.I., the combat system, and the graphics."

THE WIDE WORLD OF OBLIVION

Morrowind fans can definitely attest to the absurd level of detail present in that game. Howard has even loftier aspirations for *Oblivion*, and he's helping to craft another intricate world complete with hundreds of complex NPCs that intelligently go about their daily lives—and this time, it's made even more believable by over 2,200 pages of recorded dialogue. "It's a ridiculous amount of speech," Howard points out. "It started as a crazy idea, like all great things, and we just kept going. It really is amazing to have this much character and speech in a game." Howard estimates that it would take two around-the-clock recording studios a full month to tape everything, making *Oblivion* one of the most ambitious voice-acting endeavors ever.

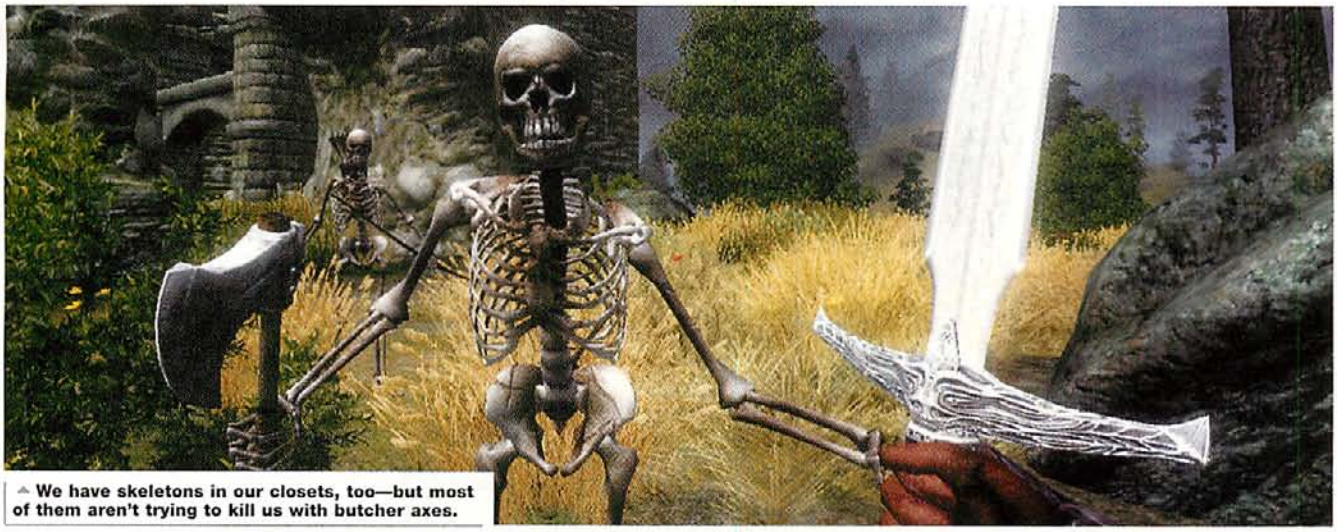
But, of course, NPC A.I. is merely a tool to help tell another involved *Elder Scrolls* story. Like its predecessors, *Oblivion* is set in the vast world of Tamriel; the focus this time is on the capital province of Cyrodiil, where—following

> THE NPC A.I. IS MERELY A TOOL TO HELP TELL ANOTHER INVOLVED *ELDER SCROLLS* STORY.

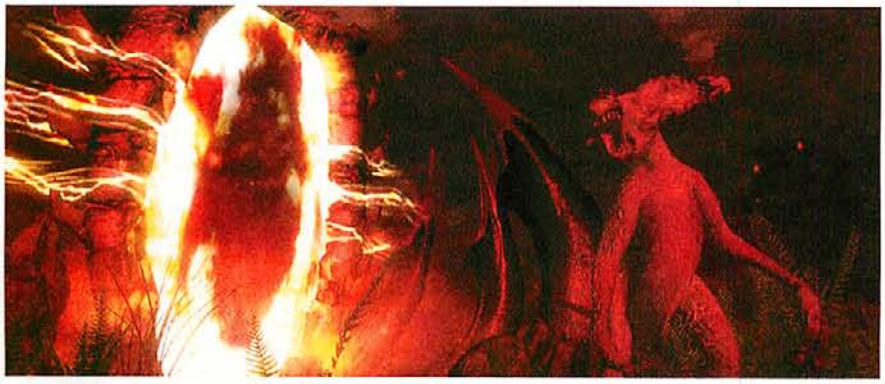




SCROLLS IV:



We have skeletons in our closets, too—but most of them aren't trying to kill us with butcher axes.



the assassination of the emperor—you're tasked with locating a long-lost heir to the throne. Meanwhile, the gates of Oblivion (a sort of hell dimension in Tamriel) remain open, paving the way for a massive demon invasion.

HELL SPAWN

When you're not exploring the 16-square-mile empire of Cyrodiil, expect to spend a large part of your time in the depths of Oblivion. "Each [part of Oblivion] is sort of its own dungeon crawl in a sense," says Howard. "[You] visit several of these as part of the main quest, but you also continue to see random gates appear in the world as long as the main quest remains unfinished, and each of these can be visited as well."

Combat is, of course, a major part of these dungeon crawls. The fighting system in *Oblivion* is deeper and more skill-based than those in previous adventures, thanks to a number of new Havok engine-powered options, which Howard outlines for us: "You control the blocking, you control what moves you do, you control [the] timing, and so forth. It plays like an FPS, but it's not a 'twitch' experience. I don't know if everyone will take to it, but most people who've played it think it's a ton of fun."

WREAKING HAVOK

The fighting engine isn't the only thing that benefits from the newly implemented Havok engine, though. *Oblivion's* physics are massively upgraded from those in *Morrowind:* Arrows stick inside objects, magical telekinesis spells can fling objects about, and shadowy stealth movements prove even more effective in helping you avoid unwanted attention. Howard is certainly happy with his new toy: "I tell you, it never gets old when you paralyze a guard in midswing and watch him tumble down the stairs, still in his swing pose, with his limbs realistically bouncing off every surface. I love Havok!"

And for those who ponder whether *Elder Scrolls* will take the multiplayer route anytime soon, don't count on it—if Howard knows one thing, it's his audience. "Multiplayer is not really something we've ever seriously considered." Works for us.

/Ryan Scott



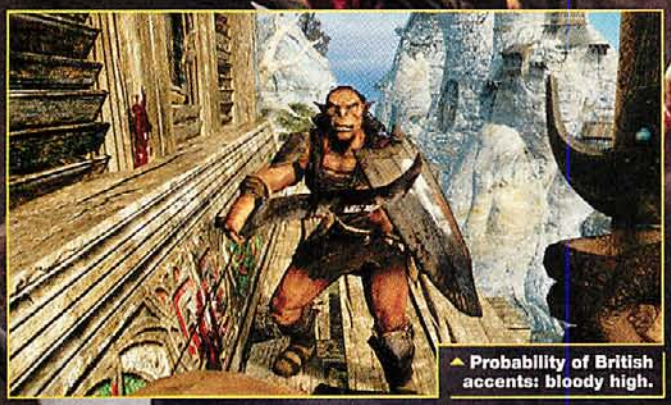
Hydroponic catnip twists characters like twist characters. Or so says Lion-O.

DO-IT-YOURSELF

Morrowind **is a mod enthusiast's dream game, and** ***Oblivion*** **takes this a step further, as the game's built-in construction set receives several enhancements. The biggest change is the new landscape-generation system, which allows you to create full terrain without forcing you to hand-place every single terrain feature. Bethesda has its own plans for downloadable content this time around—and given fans' years of experience with** ***Morrowind's*** **construction set, we won't be surprised to see even more top-notch user-created content right from the get-go.**

DARK MESSIAH OF MIGHT & MAGIC

First-person fantasy's saving throw



▲ Probability of British accents: bloody high.

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPER: **Arkane Studios** GENRE: **First-Person Action** RELEASE DATE: **Summer 2006**

EXCLUSIVE SCREENS

"IF YOU WERE TO LIVE LIFE IN AN enchanted world, how would you want to experience it?" asks Romain de Waubert de Genlis, producer of *Dark Messiah*, Arkane Studios' in-your-own-eyes take on the *Might & Magic* series of role-playing and real-time strategy games. "The first-person point of view helps us create a more impressive and—to a certain extent—more immersive experience. You can't see the creatures lurking in the shadows behind you, and it's only when you stand at a dragon's feet that you realize what it means to be five stories tall." Sorcery with hot keys: cool enough. First-person magic-making in a fantasyland governed by gravity: supercool.

Not that *Messiah* is all wand waving and mumbo jumbo. "Whether you use your muscles or your mind is up to you," adds de Genlis. "We all start the same, but none of us shares the same experience; no one ends up the same." Conan-fit warriors—the most heavily armed and armored of *Messiah*'s three character classes—lop heads with gruesome gusto; silent-but-deadly assassins stalk the shadows undetected, bow and dagger in hand; and *Messiah*'s mages—potentially the best thing to happen to abracadabra since Harry Potter—cast spells. The catch, according to de Genlis, is Valve Software's Source engine: "Its physics and potential for physical interaction let us create a lifelike world with causes and effects." Put a patch of ice on the floor, and the enemies on your heels slip and slide. Set fire to a structure, and its burning boards become makeshift missiles. Spell casting via dice: suddenly not so cool. / Shawn Elliott

MULTIPLAYER MIGHT

While producer de Genlis insists that "it's too early to get into details about the online part of the game," he does divulge that a team-based 32-man multiplayer mode is in the works. "We're fortunate to have an engine that powers physics-heavy games like *Half-Life 2*. From there on, it's easy to imagine what you'll get with *Messiah*'s multiplayer: heroic fantasy, leveling up, and loads of action."







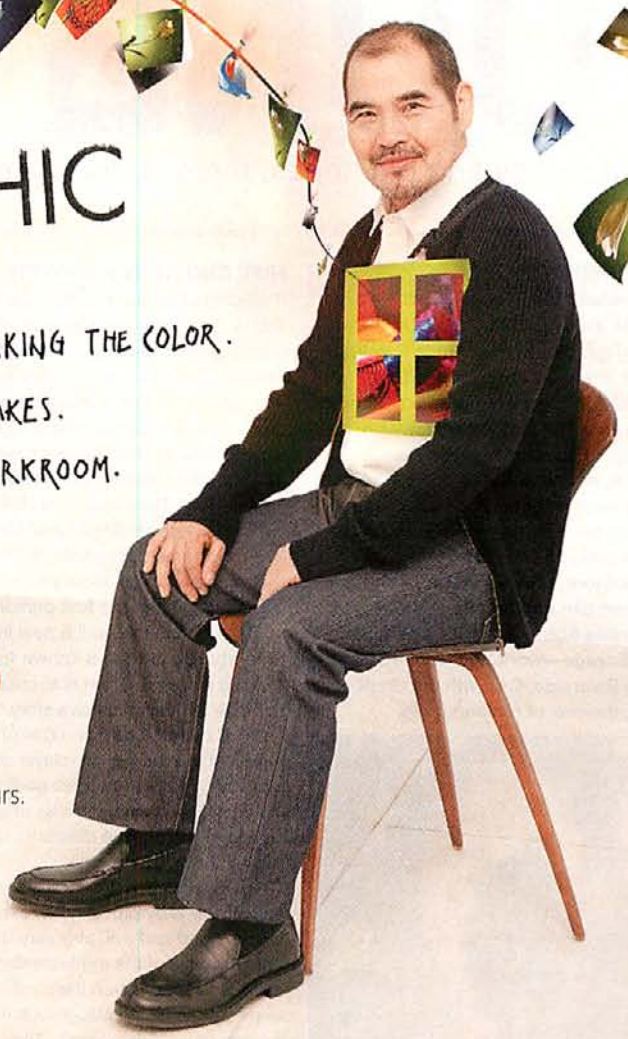
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▼ What's a fantasy game without a couple of these vertically challenged warriors? This image, like all the others in this story, is from inside the game engine. Crazy, eh?



▲ Ladies, the blonde is Sam. He's single. Date him now before he's rich and won't take your calls.

YOUNG GUNS

With little money and big hopes, three buddies are building the next big game engine

PUBLISHER: **Now accepting offers** DEVELOPER: **Offset** GENRE: **Fantasy Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **2007**

THE INSIDE STORY

BEFORE *DOOM*, JOHN CARMACK WAS making games with an Apple II in his mother's house. Then there's Sam McGrath. Who? While working on S2 Games' indie hit, *Savage: The Battle for Newerth*, McGrath planned to start his own company. While you may not have heard much about him, you will soon enough. All it took was a demo video of his new game, *Project Offset*.

McGrath is building the next killer game engine, but without a huge team or a fantastic budget. It's just him and two friends—brothers Trevor and Travis Stringer, artists who also helped with *Savage*—working out of a small apartment in Riverside, CA, with, as clichéd as it sounds, dreams of making it big.



NOT ANOTHER SHOOTER

It all started about a year and a half ago. Sam, Travis, and Trevor had been talking about creating their dream game while developing *Savage*. The idea: an epic fantasy FPS. "Most first-person shooters these days are based in World War II," says McGrath. "Don't get me wrong, they are fun, but we haven't seen a fantasy game that isn't an RPG since *Heretic* and *Hexen*." Then you have Ubisoft's upcoming *Dark Messiah: Might and Magic*. Currently in development using Valve's Source engine, that game will also allow you to hack, slash, and spell-sling in the first person. The question now becomes, how will a new intellectual property compare to a known franchise?

A big focus for Offset is to create a massive universe and an immersive story. "We've been inspired by *Half-Life 2* and *Call of Duty*, which have just amazing single-player scenarios," says McGrath. The plan involves adding a few RPG elements, such as being able to upgrade weapons and choose different character classes to play through the game.

The best way to describe the epic nature of multiplayer is by providing an example. The two teams, good and evil, play very different games. The objective of the evil team during a castle siege is to break down the castle walls with siege weapons and slaughter the innocent NPC women and children inside. The good side will need to hold the castle and light the beacons, waiting for reinforcements to arrive.

RIGHT TOOLS FOR THE JOB

The trick becomes finding the right engine to do everything that McGrath wants to accomplish. "We were struggling with the tools that we were using, banging our heads against walls. The 3D packages out there that we tried were taking a long time to hash out." It took a few months of trial and error before the team realized that the development tools currently available weren't at the level they needed for next-generation gaming. "I don't think that game creation needs to be complicated," says McGrath. "It should be fun and simple." With that in mind, he began work on an engine built for artists and modders.

"We want to give them as much opportunity to create their own universes as well," McGrath says. People will be able to build within the engine using the editing tools, and when *Project Offset* is finished, the team plans to release its source code.

Offset wants to keep things small the first year, working mainly on the engine. Then they really want to ramp up and go into full production. Many other parts of the game still need fleshing out, including the physics and gameplay scripting engines. That's going to require more people and more money.

Getting a new company—and a new game ›

(continued on page 40)

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GO ONLINE!

Want to get the latest updates on *Project Offset* and see the engine in action? We've scored exclusive video clips, art, and information about what the team is doing. It's all at cgw.1UP.com and nowhere else.

engine, for that matter—off the ground is no easy task. Sam saved every penny he's earned, and that's what has funded *Project Offset* up to this point. The focus so far has been on building the engine, but cash is running low. That's why the team started posting demo videos on the Internet. "We're shopping around our game idea and showing our technology to various publishers," says McGrath. They might even license the tech out to game developers. However, nothing could prepare them for what happened next.

Brothers Travis and Trevor Stringer complete each other's thoughts so quickly that it's hard to discern who is saying what. "We were blown away by the initial response. It's just been overwhelming. In the period of a week we've had over 1,000 e-mails, and we're trying to respond to every single one of them because we don't want to make anybody mad. We've got a lot of people just wanting to help us out. Some people are saying how much we've inspired them. Others are just psyched to see a game like this come out."

At this point they aren't making a huge chunk of money. "But it's enough to pay our bills for a while, which is really nice," says McGrath. Having cash on hand means no hasty deals. They've heard from every big-name publisher out there. "However," adds McGrath, "we're not going to take any deal that doesn't let us at least retain the rights to the engine, so we're being very cautious for sure."

Sam, Travis, and Trevor have already learned a few important lessons: Save your money; you'll need it. Check your ego at the door because game design is a collaborative process. Don't sign anything, no matter how tempting, unless a lawyer has looked at it first. And by far the most important thing, according to McGrath: "You have to go in thinking, 'We can do it.' Just believing that you can achieve the same kind of quality [as in the Unreal Engine 3 or Source Engine] makes all the difference." /**Darren Gladstone**

WHAT IS PROJECT OFFSET? The little engine that could

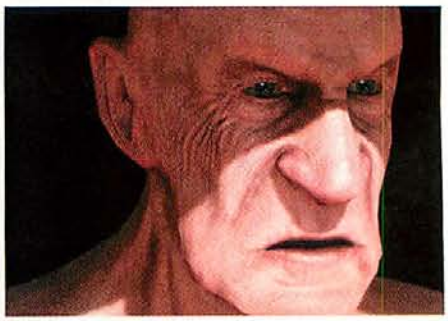
Everyone talks about Unreal Engine 3 and the like, but the video trailer at www.projectoffset.com came as a total shock. In an age of big names and bigger budgets, a small team dropped a bomb: a great-looking, scalable game engine built with modders and artists in mind.

"The graphics that we've released run nicely right now on a top-of-the-line system," says McGrath, "and the engine will be scalable, even to the high-end machines a couple years out. We really want to stay on the cutting edge of what we can do with the technology." Here are the five things you need to know about the Offset Engine.

1. It was built with the goal of reducing development time and costs.
2. It uses a fully 64-bit floating point HDR rendering pipeline for cinematic color precision—probably even more than your monitor can handle.
3. Its advanced shader system allows artists to create elaborate effects without a programmer. What would take a programmer hours to create can be done by an artist in seconds.
4. It supports texture-based shadowing (using hardware, when available).
5. It has cinematic-quality motion blur working uniformly on every object.

> "WE WERE BLOWN AWAY...IN THE PERIOD OF A WEEK WE'VE GOTTEN OVER 1,000 E-MAILS." –TRAVIS STRINGER





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STAR WARS BATTLEFRONT II

Five steps to a Force-full sequel

PUBLISHER: **LucasArts** DEVELOPER: **Pandemic Studios** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **October 2005**

EXCLUSIVE SCREENS

SURE, *BATTLEFRONT*—THE *Battlefield*-style shooter in which workaday star warriors suit up for signature battles in the series' scene-stealing vehicles—became a best-seller. But Associate Producer Dave Baker claims developer Pandemic could've done picky PC owners one better than their console-playing counterparts: "Every programmer and designer on the team wanted to do something special for the [PC] platform—we simply ran out of time. With the sequel, however, we're investing some *serious* effort in the PC version." Here's how. / **Shawn Elliott**



LIGHT AND MAGIC

The first *Battlefront* looked a lot like the game's TV-bound versions. Disturbance in the Force? We thought so. Pandemic promises improved visuals in its saga-spanning sequel. "Presentationwise, we're taking advantage of the PC's power," Baker says. "It's completely shader driven and allows us extra lights per pass and increased precision in the pixel shader. We're also supporting environment mapping [which involves applying flat textures to curved surfaces] and specular mapping [casting light on curved surfaces]." In Padawan terms, pulled-from-the-trilogy locales like the molten Mustafar and platinum-plated Coruscant come to life with a geewizardry worthy of Industrial Light & Magic's legacy.

HEADS UP

"We've added a new, more intuitive heads-up display for PC players," says Baker. "It should help you determine where everything is on the battlefield, and it also makes things that much more clear and concise in multiplayer matches, as the onscreen messaging is well organized and easier to follow. Plus, revised readouts and tracking info in space should make starfighting more fluid and fun."





HOW YOU LOOK AT IT

PC gamers prefer first-person perspective. Pandemic gets the point and has added this POV to *Battlefront II*'s 30-plus vehicles (a selection that includes *Revenge of the Sith*'s V-wing and clone speeder, along with a few venerable *Star Wars* classics). "It gives you an enhanced sense of speed in space," Baker boasts—perfect for slipping through a screen of TIE fighters and blasting a proton torpedo into a star destroyer's docking bay. Jedi "heroes" (only a faction's highest-scoring warrior can wield the Force), however, stick to the far-and-away third-person solution. Force-choking foes cold with Vader or Ginsuing 'em as the four-saber-wielding General Grievous wouldn't work as well otherwise, we're guessing.



ONLINE ALLIANCE

Pandemic is making *Battlefront II*'s online multiplayer more appropriate to the platform, too, which means 64-man skirmishes for those with light-speed Internet links (the first *Battlefront* matches that number in LAN play only, but then, when was that gonna happen?). In addition, Baker says, "Dedicated servers should run smoother and be more administrator friendly. We're improving the matchmaking services and browsers to be PC friendly and less console based. And we've also added buddy lists, stat tracking, and battle commands, which make coordinating tactics with teammates easier."



STAR WARRIORS

Say what—stormtroopers hitting something? Producer Dan Pettit says it's so: "We're working on A.I. It's definitely a necessity in order for us to deliver an enhanced single-player experience." But Imperials and Rebels, federalists and clones, and cannon fodder of all stripes need more than marksmanship to conquer the galaxy. "Whether friend or foe," Pettit adds, "they now need to consider strategy for current objectives [and] react to what the player does." If you jump in a Jedi starfighter and start dogfighting in space, for instance, your A.I. allies should defend your capital ship by manning its several turrets. And for those who haven't boarded the broadbandwagon (or are online but want a bigger match without waiting for servers to fill up), *Battlefront II* offers more computer-controlled friends and foes than its console cousins do. "More units means it's more like the movies," says Baker. "Who doesn't want to battle it out on Hoth with 50-some stormtroopers rushing the bunker?"

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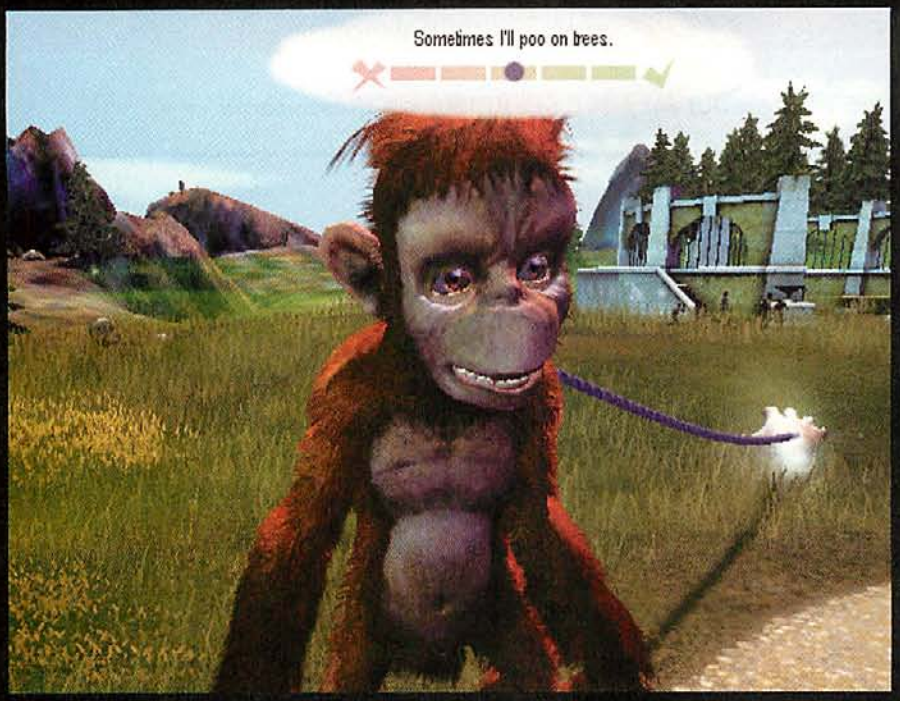
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▲ My good conscience sees lovely scenery. My bad conscience sees a great place to keep my beer cold.



▲ You can zoom down far enough to see the whites of your villagers' eyes.

60 MINUTES WI

We spend 30 minutes apiece with visionary developer Peter Molyneux's *Black*

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **Lionhead Studios** RELEASE DATE: **October 2005**

BLACK & WHITE 2

LIKE ITS PREDECESSOR, *BLACK & White 2* is a god game that puts you in the role of a deity whose evil or benevolence depends on your choices. Your disciples—in the preview I played, the Greek civilization and a creature of my choosing—do your bidding as you attempt to bring their civilization to prominence. Whether you do so by economic and cultural dominance or military power—the RTS portion of the game—is up to you.
/Kristen Salvatore

00:01 The opening cut-scene introduces me to two creatures who explain that they are my good and bad consciences. My good conscience sounds like a kindly grandfather with a vaguely British accent. My bad conscience sounds like an extra from *The Sopranos*.
00:09 My consciences urge me to choose a creature to raise, explaining that the way I treat my creature will turn him into a kindly and mischievous pet or a weapon of destruction. The cow keeps grinning and shaking her udder at me, so I reject her overt cuteness factor and go with the monkey.
00:13 I'm supposed to be able to control the entire game via the mouse, but the cursor has become a disembodied hand that, much like a boy at a junior high school dance, doesn't always grab where it's supposed to. Arrow keys, you are my friends.
00:16 I meet my villagers, who are immediately attacked by the Aztec army, which is a little weird since my villagers are Greek. A great battle scene ensues. You can zoom way in, pretty much right into the faces of the villagers, most of which are currently contorted with fear. I learn how to move my little Greeks out of danger, although I can pick up only one of them at a time, so I manage to spare maybe 10 of them. They end up in a new, peaceful place to start a new, peaceful town. I start tending to their needs, which, if I do a good job, will ultimately amount to making them a great and prosperous people. I can do that in two ways: either help them build such a great town that other towns want to migrate to it...or train them to be killing machines that go out and take other towns. I decide that for now, instead of making war, we're going to....
00:21 Make love, baby! My villagers' current desire, according to the desire status box, is to become "breeders." I make them into breeders by picking them up and dropping them on top of one another. It's a lot like a Craigslist personals ad. Before long, my town is filled with waddling pregnant women who, when it's time to deliver, lie down wherever they happen to be standing, which is usually in the middle of the street. Five seconds later, they get right back up and go back to whatever they were doing. In one case, that was hauling wood. They are tough ladies, these Greeks.
00:25 I wake up my sleeping creature, who immediately eats one of the pregnant villagers. It's my job to steer him toward good or evil by punishing or rewarding such behavior, so I give him a scratch by moving the mouse (and thus my disembodied hand) forward and back, which teaches him that snacking on pregnant Greeks is just fine! I feel bad about that, so I move the mouse back and forth, causing my disembodied hand to slap him across his little monkey face. Then I feel bad about *that*...but it's a really satisfying sound. I continue sweeping the mouse back and forth, feeling a little like Joan Collins on *Dynasty*.
00:30 I can tell my creature to do things other than eat villagers, so I set him to work building villas for my Greeks. Hey, it's an RTS—the amount of stuff you need to think about can get overwhelming, so I'm happy to have the extra pair of hands. The game's wonky controls are getting to me, too, and I'm starting to wonder whether I want to keep at it. Then I see the following in a word bubble above my creature's head: "Sometimes I'll poo on trees."

I may not drop everything when *Black & White 2* comes out—especially if the controls remain so tough and the framerate so finicky—but for the promise of pooing on trees, I'll probably give it at least another few hours.



▲ Who needs clumsy menus when you can have floor plans instead?



▲ Which way do I go? Just follow the magical, ethereal trails. Seem strange? It's Hollywood, baby!



MOLYNEUX TELLS FABLES

Want more Molyneux? We review the forward-thinking developer's action-RPG *Fable: The Lost Chapters* on page 96.

TH MOLYNEUX

& *White 2* and *The Movies*

PUBLISHER: **Activision** DEVELOPER: **Lionhead Studios** RELEASE DATE: **November 2005**

THE MOVIES

WE'VE ALL BEEN RAILROAD TYCOONS and run empires, but I always knew I could make it in Hollywood. Enter *The Movies*, a Tinseltown sandbox that starts with you creating silent films and eventually leads you to making special-effects blockbusters. The main game has you dealing with the day-to-day issues of building a movie studio. The real fun for most folks, though, might come from making their own in-game flicks and sharing them with the world at large. Call my agent. Let's talk. /Darren Gladstone

00:00 Welcome to showbiz. My time with movie-studio sim *The Movies* starts slowly in the silent era. Pop-up hints spell out the basics for a humble beginning. Nevertheless, being a big schemer, I begin with ambitious plans for expansion: creating my own virtual entertainment empire, Krustyloo Productions. (In retrospect, I should've worried about getting my studio to the "talkies" era before creating another Industrial Light & Magic.) Working in a huge lot, I drop down production studios, stages, and the odd porta-potty, but for some reason I'm sure the strategy's about to bite me in the ass.

00:08 The interface is growing on me. I'm loving the utter lack of menus and complicated trappings—and then it gets confusing. You see, when I grab a person, these opaque lines pop up to suggest where I should put him. Should I take actor A to rehab or to a set, or simply fire the bum? Arrows start pointing me in too many different directions at once. It's like some messed-up sign on the Styx turnpike near the eighth circle of hell exit. But hey, at least I can turn it off. What's cool, though, is that when I mouse over a building, it cuts away to a floor plan that clearly illustrates all the things I can do in the structure.

> HERE I AM WITH MY FIRST FILM IN THE CAN, AND I'VE NEARLY BANKRUPTED THE STUDIO.

00:15 Remember that nagging sense that I'd screwed up? Turns out I need to pave the lot to connect all of its locations together, and that quickly gets expensive since I spaced everything out. Here I am with my first film in the can, and I've nearly bankrupted the studio. That's why God invented cheat codes!

00:17 Enough with this sim stuff, it's moviemaking time. I quit back to the Main menu, and it turns out that all that hardcore machinima-wannabe moviemaking I've been dying to try is here...and without the "did you do this, did you do that" hassle. So even if I don't want to play *The Movies*' game mode, I can cut to the chase and create my magnum opus—the sordid tale of an alien in the Wild West and a donkey named Clarabelle.

00:20 With scripts in development, I can pick my flick's pacing and map out its action. On the set, I can select backdrops, props, and costumes (advancing through the "proper" game got me some new gear to work with).

00:25 I'm now obsessing about which direction to take my masterpiece. So many options! Did I mention that you can also record your own voices for these miniflicks? The pressure is building. I just realized that there's going to be an online film competition, with a panel of Hollywood judges awarding prizes for the best clips.

00:30 Stop bothering me. You know that this is a closed set, right? Go on! Scram! Oh, and check out www.themoviesplanet.com, where you can download the promotional *StarMaker* program—a version of the actor-generating engine that the actual game will use—and get a head start on birthing your own celebs.

PUBLIC ACCESS

A finger on the pulse of PC-gaming fringe culture

GAMEMAKERS MAKE THE GAMES. WE BUY 'EM. But what happens next isn't necessarily what anyone expected, especially when a game goes online./ Shawn Elliott

FAMOUS FOR 15 MINUTES

INTERVIEW

IN CASE YOU MISSED THE MASSIVELY CIRCULATED "Leeroy Jenkins" video clip recorded in MMO *World of WarCraft*, here's the setup: A guild of high-level players prepares to raid the Rookery dragon's den. "Abduhl" crunches numbers, calling a "33.3—repeating, of course—percent chance of survival." Other players suss out their plan of attack spell by spell. And then, as the hugely technical strategy is still taking shape, it happens: Clueless miner/engineer Leeroy Jenkins comes back to his controls, shouting, "All right, chums, let's do this," and charges directly into the dungeon.

With the help of interviewed.todeath.com, we tracked down troublemaker Ben Schulz, the one and only Leeroy Jenkins.

CGW: You play with the Pals for Life guild, right? How do the guys like Leeroy's stunts?

Ben Schulz: Yep. So I pull some sh*** every once in a while...everyone in the guild does.

CGW: What were you doing while you were AFK?

BS: Getting—and then eating—Kentucky Fried Chicken, of course.

CGW: So was it staged? It sure looks like you're going out of your way to stir up a whole lot of s*.**

BS: We like to let folks wonder. Besides, it makes forums more fun and whatnot.

CGW: Have you had any trouble getting pickup groups in Iron Forge [the main hub city for Alliance players]?

BS: For a while, I couldn't speak in general chat because it stirred up so many people and I wouldn't get a word in. You know, some people would start yelling my name, and others would tell me to "go drink bleach." Lately, I've been able to function more or less like a "normal" player.

CGW: How has Leeroy's fame affected your life?

BS: Aside from a few interviews like this and getting attention in-game, it hasn't. Well...when I told some guys in a game store that I was Leeroy, they went a little apesh*t. Oh, and I sell shirts. That's all.

CGW: Word is that developer Blizzard likes your work....

BS: That's what I hear. I have talked to Blizzard, but I haven't really been able to get anywhere with it...which is unfortunate, since I'm looking for a job.

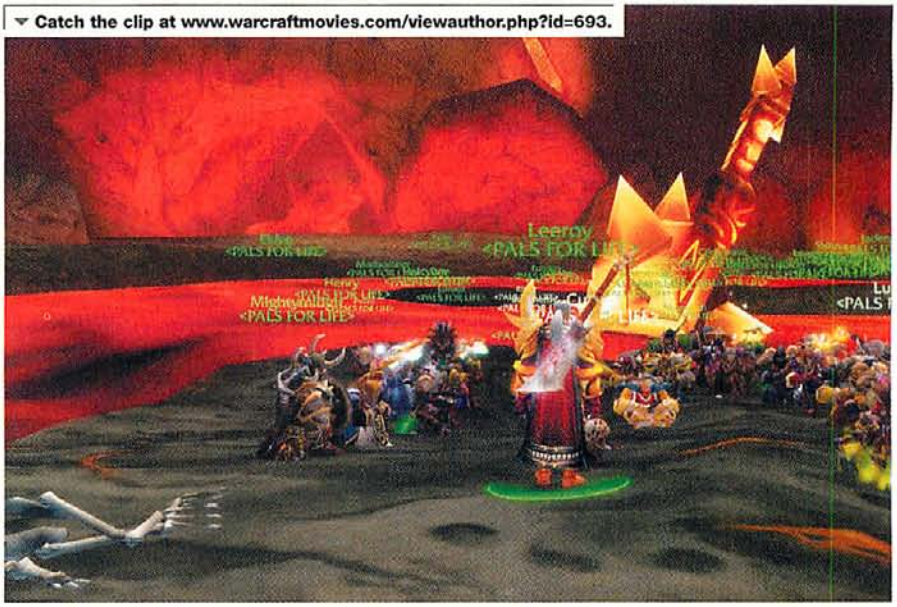
CGW: What does Abduhl calculate with?

BS: His brain. Abduhl's a smart fellow. Unfortunately, he had his account banned, so let's send some letters to Blizzard about getting him back. Otherwise, who'll crunch our numbers?

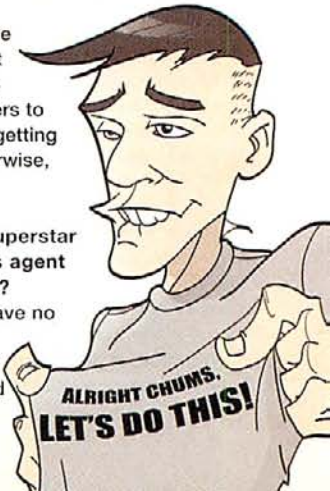
CGW: Has superstar William Hung's agent contacted you?

BS: Huh? I have no clue who Mr. Hung is or why his agent would contact me./

▼ **Catch the clip at www.warcraftmovies.com/viewauthor.php?id=693.**



» "I HAVE NO CLUE WHO MR. HUNG IS." –BEN "LEEROY JENKINS" SCHULZ




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OCTOBER 2005

SEE IT! BATTLEFIELD 2 STUNTING ON THIS MONTH'S DISC



LOSING THE WILL TO FIGHT

IT SEEMS STRAIGHTFORWARD—A BLUE Angels feat of synchronized flying—until one pilot plunges from his plane. But that too is part of the show. Free-falling over the open ocean, he streaks through some clouds and stops, abruptly but safely, in the cockpit of a helo hovering below. Mission accomplished for the so-called Sir Community (www.thesir-community.com) of *Battlefield 2* stuntmen.

Other favorite daredevil feats (some on display on this month's *CGW* demo disc) include more complicated pilot transfers. "I'll fly a plane close to the runway where someone else is waiting with a satchel charge at his feet," explains community member Eric Szymaszek. "Then I bail out before I pass overhead while he blows himself up and into the cockpit."

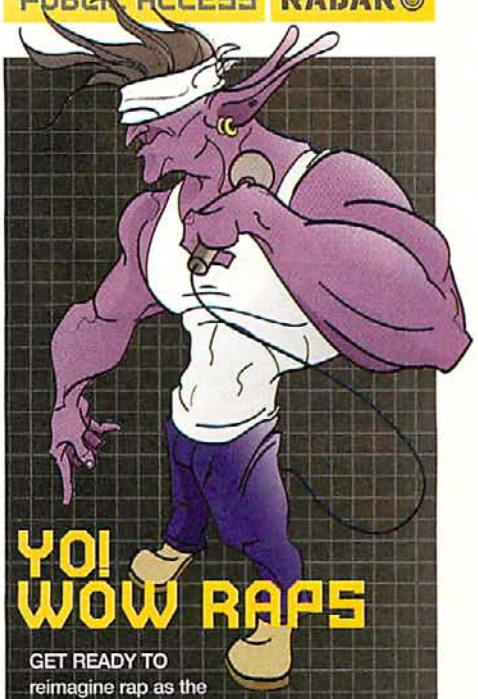
Stuntman Celt prefers the "C4 jump": "We have multiple [special operatives] place charges on the back of a Humvee and then detonate 'em in stages as it climbs a slope to send it flying."

"Sometimes one stunter orchestrates the action; other times you figure it out yourself first, and then everyone gives it a shot," Szymaszek says. "We more or less turn the battlefield into a big sandbox with stuff happening here and there. The one and only thing you can't do is kill."

"It's something a bunch of forum hobos can have fun with," adds community founder Justin Kelly. "But it's also something that takes gobs of timing and precision; something to be proud of as you grow and progress."

Connected by a shared experimental spirit and "can't we all just get along" leanings, Sir Community members make their own space for collaborative, noncompetitive expression—one that gamemakers aren't providing, at least not deliberately. "Other games let you get around in jeeps, whereas *Battlefield* gives us the ability to blow them over mountains. We just have to figure out how to do it," says Szymaszek. "And it turns out that you can do wild stuff—stuff that's often more fun than straightforward combat."/





YO! WOW RAPS

GET READY TO reimagine rap as the CNN of the guild hall. When producer Andy Crosby and MC Kenny Battle aren't killing in-character conversation as Noxxaz and Kenwicke, the wiseacre *World of WarCraft* players make laugh-out-loud, un-hip-hop music (sample lyric: "I was helpin' out some guildies on a run of the stockades / but the Stormwind school for wenches was due for a panty raid.").

"We play *WOW* all the frickin' time, so it seemed like a natural fit," Crosby explains. "We're down with what everybody knows but doesn't always talk about—dumping grays [useless items] off at the bank, spamming looking-for-group chat channels—you know, everyday life in Azeroth."

Battle sees fame in the future: "I want to headline BlizzCon."

"We'd have to get helmets and swords or something, though," Crosby adds, "and ladies doing that night elf thong dance they do."

Sample the duo's songs at www.soundclick.com/jiggle07./



ILLUSTRATION BY RORY MAHON

CRAZY CAT LAD

"FIRST OFF, I HAPPENED TO HAVE ONE HORDE ACCOUNT," EXPLAINS *WORLD OF WARCRAFT* Angus Chassels, "and then my coworkers convinced me to create an Alliance character on the same server. I never intended to trade from one side to the other, and, in fact, it hadn't occurred to me that you could." Soon after, though, a possibility presented itself: Chassels saw promise in the exotic pet trade—supplying the Horde with Alliance cats (an otherwise inaccessible commodity), to be exact.

Investing as much energy in *WOW*'s economy as a Wall Street speculator would on the stock market, Chassels spent 30-some minutes swimming from Theramore to Gadgetzan. "It's not something people do with a level 1 character," says Chassels, "unless they have their eye on a peculiar prize. Anyhow, now my Alliance mage buys cats from [NPC] Donna the Crazy Cat Lady outside of Stormwind and then 'sells' them for nothing to my original Horde character at the Gadgetzan auction house, who in turn mails them to my level 1 orc named CrazyCatLady, who then sells 'em." Chassels sells some six cats a day, and has made more than 3,000 gold. "It feels more like playing the stock market than farming."

So far, no one has complained about Chassels' business, most likely, he says, because cats are a luxury: "No one's getting Death Ray of the Ancients or whatever from selling tabbies," he says. "And while the [money] does make life a little easier, most stuff is level locked, so no matter how much cash you have, you can't use the items (Blizzard's way of tempering the economy and money schemes). My goal is to start a store someday and sell pets on the side, but Blizzard will have to make buying a storefront an option."/

POST-MORTEM

At first, *Guild Wars* generated skepticism—after all, how could anyone hope to maintain an MMO with no monthly fee? Six months later, NCsoft's gift-horse game is still going strong, a massively populated world of swords, spells, and...erm, strip tease that ArenaNet community relations manager Gaile Gray says is still growing, with even more options for PVP buffs and hardcore roleplayers alike. We asked Gray to offer her thoughts on the game as it hits its half-year birthday. /Ryan Scott

GUILD WARS RAGE ON AS ARENANET LOOKS AHEAD

CGW: You've managed to turn an off-the-beaten-track MMO into a bona fide success—surprised?

Gaile Gray: It's easy to say now, but we were confident that *Guild Wars* would be a global success. We're gamers too, so we knew that we had the experience and the vision to make a great game. Add to that a no-subscription-fee business model, and it seemed to make success even more of a sure thing.

CGW: The flexible character class system didn't hurt either.

GG: The dual-class system hit a chord with players. *GW* isn't the first to offer it, but we've incorporated a few twists on the usual scheme, particularly with the depth of the skill and attribute system. Experienced RPG players are having a blast creating combinations and seeing the way that these new characters play through the game in different ways; new RPG players are enjoying the benefits of instanced missions and a comfortable learning curve.

CGW: We've gotta say, though, having four character slots is a little limiting for folks (like us) who enjoy experimenting.

GG: There will come a time when players will be able to have more than four character slots. If you think about future installments in the *GW* saga and the strong possibility that each of them might offer new professions, four character slots just won't be enough.

CGW: Anything else you'd change—say, a particularly overpowered or underpowered class combo, for example?

GG: Offering 450 skills is bound to cause a lot of concerns about balance and fair play. Players have seen the "überbuild" in enough games to be somewhat wary of elaborate progression systems. But balance has been our first and main focus from day one, and it continues to remain our primary objective even now. We've been able to stream modest changes, and we've held major events such as our PVP Extreme Weekend (PVPX) in late August to verify necessary changes.

CGW: Sounds extremely extreme. Seriously, though, how do these events help you expand *Guild Wars*' PVP options?

GG: August's event showed us that increasing the rewards for PVP play was both necessary and wise. The feedback we received before the event provided us with a lot of guidance on what players wanted most. We reacted with a substantial boost to faction points and with special rewards for PVP accomplishments...and the players loved it. We're going to keep watching the gameplay progression and reward systems to ensure that both PVP players and cooperative players are adequately rewarded.

CGW: Beyond PVP, what are you doing to keep Ascended (post–level 20) players playing?





GUILD WARS



GG: Our summer update, *Sorrow's Furnace*, introduced two large new areas—areas specifically intended for Ascended characters, although others are welcome to give them a try. They offer new quests, new monsters, and cool new [item] rewards.

CGW: Any secret additions in store for the different guild halls?

GG: One of our objectives is to make a game that celebrates guilds in every way possible. We'll be adding new guild features in the coming months with our free live updates, and with next year's release. While the list isn't final, some of the guild and guild hall improvements we're considering include guild storage, personalized guild hall features, crafters and traders within the guild hall, guild templates for characters, and the option to toggle capes on and off.

CGW: Take the capes off? Promiscuous players already strip down to the fig leaf for dirty dance-a-thons.

GG: When the programming team added the ability to synchronize dancing with players of the same type, the whole place exploded.

CGW: OK, now for a pair of real riddles. First off, why don't characters' mouths ever move during cut-scenes?

GG: Because [they] have the amazing ability to emit sounds and communicate their messages without such mundane things as mouth movement! OK, OK, fine...due to the fact that *GW* has been localized into six languages thus far, we felt that our development time was better spent creating more content rather than expending the time and effort to lip-synch dialogue to various languages. We'll continue to refine the immersion of the story, and having more realistic facial animation is definitely something we'll look into for the future.

CGW: Fair enough. Why can't we seem to get the upper hand against *Guild Wars*' Korea-based guilds?

GG: Koreans are exceptional gamers, and once they sink their teeth into a game, they become formidable foes. We've seen it in several other extremely popular games, and now we're seeing it—and loving it—in *GW*. You could say that the top Korean players take their gaming very seriously; we've been told that the guilds that are frequently in the top ranks of the *GW* ladder spend quite a bit of time working on strategies and counterstrategies, improving their builds, and staying in touch with one another as they prepare for a day of gaming. They pride themselves on their study of the game and in being able to turn on a dime once they identify the strategies being used by their opponents.

CGW: And finally...what's next for the game?

GG: The next installment is scheduled for release in the first half of 2006. We have global tournaments coming up, we'll continue to have weekend events, and we're committed to making ongoing balance changes to keep the game fresh and challenging. The design team tracks fan requests, and they're well aware that some of the most popular requests are for additional professions or races. Either or both of these things are pretty likely in the next installment of *Guild Wars*, but only time will tell.

There's more where this came from. Check out cgwguildwars.1UP.com for the full interview!

"ONE OF OUR OBJECTIVES IS TO MAKE A GAME THAT CELEBRATES GUILDS IN EVERY WAY POSSIBLE."

—GAILE GRAY, ARENANET COMMUNITY RELATIONS MANAGER



LOOKING FOR A GOOD CHARACTER BUILD?

Here are a few of ArenaNet's favorites.

RANGER/WARRIOR

ATTRIBUTES: Axe Mastery (12), Tactics (9), Expertise (5+2), Wilderness Survival (8+1)

SKILLS: Cleave, Disrupting Chop, Cyclone Axe, Apply Poison, Frenzy, Storm Chaser, Resurrection Signet, Throw Dirt

NECROMANCER/MONK

ATTRIBUTES: Death Magic (12+2), Blood Magic (10+1), Soul Reaping (8+1)

SKILLS: Martyr, Plague Sending, Plague Touch, Well of Suffering, Putrid Explosion, Resurrection Signet, Order of Pain, Strip Enchantment

WARRIOR/NECROMANCER

ATTRIBUTES: Curses (11), Axe Mastery (11+4), Strength (8+1). Use a cold-based weapon with this build!

SKILLS: Dismember, Axe Rake, Axe Twist, "Victory is mine!", Rush, Rigor Mortis, Spinal Shivers, Resurrection Signet

MESMER/NECROMANCER

ATTRIBUTES: Fast Casting (10), Domination (13), Inspiration (9), Death Magic (8)

SKILLS: Shatter Hex, Leech Signet, Power Drain, Power Leak, Power Block, Signet of Humility, Putrid Explosion, Resurrection Signet

MONK/RANGER

ATTRIBUTES: Healing Prayers (11), Divine Prayers (10), Wilderness Survival (10). Use runes to boost Healing Prayers and Divine Prayers, and wear tattoos for added energy.

SKILLS: Word of Healing [elite], Heal Other, Signet of Devotion, Healing Breeze, Healing Seed, Dryder's Defenses, Healing Spring, Resurrection. You may substitute Light of Dwayna for Hall of Heroes PVP builds.



WARHA

Dawn of a new war



TANGLING WITH TITLES

The original subtitle for this game was *Legions of Chaos*—which, unfortunately, had to be dropped due to an early leak prior to legal approval. D'oh!



PUBLISHER: **Namco** DEVELOPER: **Synergy Interactive** GENRE: **RTS** RELEASE DATE: **Fall 2006**

EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

SCI-FI RTS JUNKIES ARE STILL HOT FOR THQ'S *WARHAMMER 40,000: Dawn of War*—especially with the *Winter Assault* expansion pack now hitting store shelves. Fans of the more traditional sword-and-sorcery *Warhammer* fantasy license have been left out in the cold, but that ends late next year thanks to Namco's tentatively titled *Warhammer RTS*, which brings Games Workshop's tabletop miniatures game back to its Tolkien-inspired roots in an all-new, massive-scale real-time strategy epic, courtesy of *Armies of Exigo* developer Synergy Interactive.

One of the first questions hardcore *Warhammer* players are likely to have is, What factions are represented? While the miniatures game features over a dozen different armies, Synergy is concentrating on four for its creation: Empire, Chaos, high elves, and skaven. Other factions beyond these four also pop up, but in more of a limited capacity; you can supplement your army with alternative units throughout the game, including dwarven gunners, goblin warriors, or even a few vampiric undead squads.

SQUAD TACTICS

"Squad" is the key word here: Synergy says battles take on the sort of *Braveheart*-caliber scale embraced by games such as *Rome: Total War*, as you command multiple squads made up of several dozen units each. *Warhammer RTS* eschews the typical basecentric conventions of most RTS games, instead focusing almost completely on battlefield tactics. You draft an army in advance via a simple point-based system (similar to that of the tabletop game), which means what you see on the field is pretty much what you get for the duration of your military career.

Warhammer's single-player mode encompasses two different campaigns. One features the good-aligned Empire and high elves, and the other puts you in control of the nefarious Chaos and skaven armies. Territories throughout the *Warhammer* world become your battlegrounds, and many areas have both primary and optional secondary objectives, which helps to deter the typically linear RTS gameplay model. More and more territories fall under your banner as you blaze a trail across the game map, and if your army hits a rough spot along the way, you can even request reinforcements from allied neighboring areas.

And if you scoff at single-player campaigns in RTS games, *Warhammer* provides a clever incentive to give this one a second look: Once you finish up the campaign, you can import your battle-hardened army online to wage war against other players. The multiplayer game presents several scenarios based on historical battles from established *Warhammer* fiction, as well as a siege-style mode in which one player fights to defend a fortress while his opponent works to bring the house down.

PAINTIN' PEWTER

For the truly geeky *Warhammer* fans out there who just can't be satisfied by the included multiplayer scenarios, *Warhammer* offers a flexible editor right out of the box. This tool gives you everything you need to create original scenarios and multiplayer maps, customize terrain, and repaint your army. Just think of it as your digital *Warhammer* paintbrush.

/Ryan Scott

> *WARHAMMER RTS* ESCHEWS THE TYPICAL BASECENTRIC CONVENTIONS OF MOST RTS GAMES, INSTEAD FOCUSING ALMOST COMPLETELY ON BATTLEFIELD TACTICS.

MMER RTS





Condom crusaders (right) rally for a "wrap that rascal" campaign.



Empire musketeers face a wave of skaven.





Behold, rat-men gather for the great Gouda war.



A squad of halberdiers charges into battle.

VIRTUAL STUPIDITY

The dumb things gamers do

A WISE MAN ONCE SAID, "IF SOMEthing bad happens to you, it's comedy; if something bad happens to me, it's tragedy." Call it Darwin's evolutionary theory in action, call it schadenfreude—misery just loves company. So here at *CGW* we decided to hand out awards for some of the dumber moments in gamingdom. We want to assure you, though, that the game industry doesn't have a stranglehold on boneheaded moves. It just seems that way sometimes.

DESPERATELY SEEKING IDIOTS

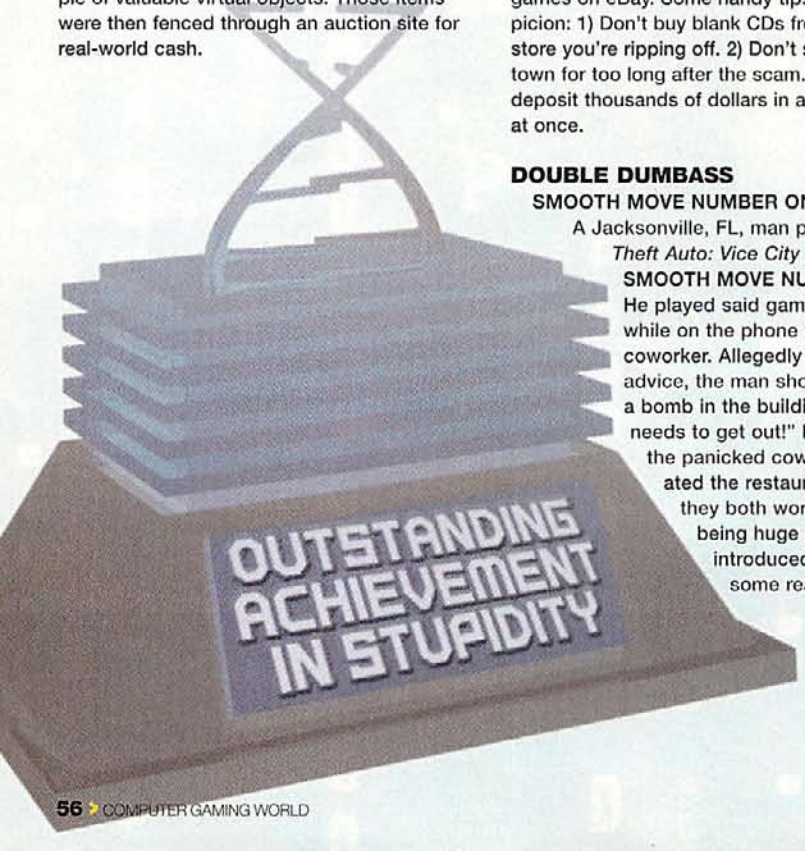
Got any good stories about brushes with gaming idiocy? We want to hear about it! E-mail CGWletters@ziffdavis.com

UNFAIR TRADE

Hate it when you loan something to someone and it's never returned? A Shanghai gamer loaned a buddy in the game *Legend of Mir 3* a rare dragon saber. In exchange, his "friend" sold the sword online for 7,200 yuan (approximately $890). The irate gamer brandished a saber of his own and stabbed the former friend to death. He is standing trial and may receive a life sentence with no possibility of leveling up.

CRIME.EXE

A chinese exchange student was arrested in southern Japan for brazenly mugging people—in *Lineage II*. The felonious PVP-er used a gang of software bots to beat up and rob people of valuable virtual objects. Those items were then fenced through an auction site for real-world cash.





LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

A 22-year-old Australian gamer paid $26,500 to buy an island in the game *Project Entropia*. The virtual paradise, complete with an unfurnished castle and beautiful beaches, is now his. We don't know who's crazier: the guy spending that much real-world money on a digital domain or the people lining up to rent beachfront property from him.

CRIME DOESN'T PAY ENOUGH

A crafty con man with a shrink-wrap roll and blow dryer was robbing game stores in West Bountiful, UT. The scam worked something like this: take recently purchased games to a hotel room, unwrap them, pull out the disc, and insert a blank one. After resealing the boxes, he'd return them for full credit and sell the games on eBay. Some handy tips to avoid suspicion: 1) Don't buy blank CDs from the same store you're ripping off. 2) Don't stick around town for too long after the scam. 3) Don't deposit thousands of dollars in a local bank all at once.

DOUBLE DUMBASS

SMOOTH MOVE NUMBER ONE: A Jacksonville, FL, man played *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* with a child. **SMOOTH MOVE NUMBER TWO:** He played said game with a child while on the phone with a coworker. Allegedly giving game advice, the man shouted, "There's a bomb in the building! Everyone needs to get out!" Hearing this, the panicked coworker evacuated the restaurant where they both work. The police, being huge fans of *GTA*, introduced the man to some real felons.

EXIT THE DRAGON

A notorious criminal in the Chinese underworld, dubbed Evil Dragon by the local press, was wanted for murder and kidnapping, to name a few "greatest hits." What ultimately brought the cops to his door was his online gaming habit. After learning what games he played, the police tracked him down in-game.

FAMILIAL PWNAGE, PART 1

The "Parents of the Year" award goes to a couple from Incheon, South Korea. The two stopped by a local Internet café to clock in a little time playing *World of WarCraft*. Too bad they forgot about their 4-year-old at home in the real world. A few hours later they returned to find their child had died from suffocation. "We were thinking of playing for just an hour or two and returning home like usual," the couple told police, "but the game took longer that day." Word has it the prison warden has a level 50 tauren shaman.

FAMILIAL PWNAGE, PART 2

While not fatally dumb, public embarrassment is always funny. Brion, a level 57 night elf hunter, got grounded by his mom in *World of WarCraft*'s message boards: "Pardon me for hijacking the thread, here...but, Brion—if you don't want your mother to know you were up and on the computer at 3:29 in the morning, DON'T post on a forum that she reads. Busted. Grounded."



THE BRB AWARD

A South Korean man keeled over and died after a 50-hour marathon of RTS gaming. The 28-year-old man got up only for bathroom breaks and quick naps over three days. He had recently quit his job to spend more time playing games. When confronted by concerned friends, he reportedly said, "I'll finish this game and go home." He died of heart failure a few minutes later.

/Darren Gladstone







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WIRELESS GAME — Vicarious Visions

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ELECTRIC MAYHEM

Messing around online, one game at a time. This month's victim: *The Matrix Online*

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE PLAY BAD GAMES? IS IT JUST TOO hard for them to admit that they wasted 20 (or 50) dollars? Are they like cultists who give away all their worldly possessions and then can't back out when it comes time to down a Kool-Aid and Drano cocktail? Then again, maybe they're just able to see something the rest of us can't. Maybe there's some hidden merit in a game that others dismissed out of hand because of superficial flaws. And so, we take the blue pill, with reporter's notepad in hand, and enter the Matrix.

Our journey started simply enough, with us wondering what people thought of *The Matrix Online* and Sony Online Entertainment's recent acquisition of the game from developer Monolith and publisher Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment. Then it just got weird. / **Scott Sharkey**



Scoop: Why are you still playing this game?
Teknorat: I guess the live events, the desire to find out what happens next—that and the community. A lot of people here have a close bond that you can't find in other MMOs.
Scoop: How do you feel about SOE buying *The Matrix Online*?
Teknorat: While on the one hand I'm sad to see Monolith go—let's face it, they put a lot of work into this game—on the other hand I feel SOE may have a positive influence overall. Sony gets some bad press over the way it maintains its MMOs, but people should keep in mind that Warner Bros. will not let the *Matrix* franchise die. I think on the whole, we should be optimistic. :)
Scoop: Who would win in a fight: Neo or Godzilla?
Teknorat: Godzilla, of course. Neo would throw the fight, collect his bribe, and go home for beers. Uh, what press are you with, exactly?

Scoop: How long did it take you to reach level 50?
tr1gga: About three months....
Scoop: Three months. Wow. So why are you still playing this game?
tr1gga: For the story and because I still have abilities to buy.
Scoop: Describe in single words only the good things that come into your mind about your mother.
tr1gga: WTF. LMFAO.





Scoop: Why are you still playing this game?
NeonAngel: I enjoy walking around, fighting the other players, and the challenge of getting to level 50.
Scoop: How long have you been playing?
NeonAngel: About...a week now.
Scoop: If you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be?
NeonAngel: Hmm, maybe a willow tree.

Scoop: Do you have time to answer a few questions?
IChokeU:...
Scoop: Why are you invisible?
IChokeU:...
Scoop: Thank you for your time.
[Curious, I followed him around for a few minutes. I later discovered, thanks to keen investigating skills, that IChokeU was sneaking around and looking up the digital dresses of virtual women and taking screenshots of them. Sadly, I'm not kidding.]





Scoop: How long did it take you to get to Level 50?
Charlenna: Around a month and a half of hard playing, with a couple breaks here and there. =P I hear complaints about it being difficult to level in this game, but having played other MMOs, [I found it to be] pretty easy. Quite refreshing actually.
Scoop: Why are you still playing?
Charlenna: : [It's] casual-gamer friendly, [it has] decent PVP action—basically, [it has] what I've been looking for in a game.
Scoop: Ha-ha. No, really.
Charlenna: : I have some friends who came, too, made some friends here at the same time, so [I've had] no reason to leave.
Scoop: What do you use to eat soup?
Charlenna: : A spoon. =P
Scoop: There is no spoon.

Scoop: How long did it take you to get to level 50?
gawk: Total game playtime was 14 days, 12 hours: I just made level 50 on Saturday.
Scoop: Why are you still playing?
gawk: PVP.
Scoop: Are you the One?
gawk: No.
Scoop: Shucks.



WHY ARE YOU STILL PLAYING *THE MATRIX ONLINE?*

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TOM CLANCY'S GHOST RECON ADVANCED WARFIGHTER

Ghost Recon 2, KIA—reinforcements en route

PUBLISHER: **Ubisoft** DEVELOPERS: **Red Storm, GRIN** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Winter 2005**

SITREP:

Mexico City, 2013. On the eve of signing a trilateral North American defense treaty, the Canadian prime minister is assassinated. Bomb blasts strike in the heart of Mexico City, and only a handful of elite U.S. forces are on hand to stem the chaos. Time to earn your pay, Ghosts.





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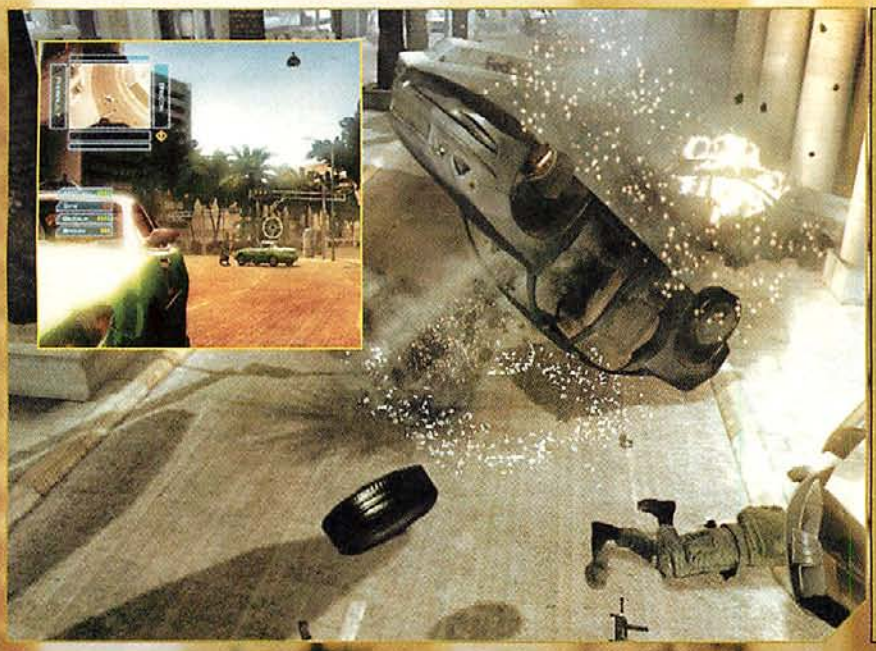
GUNG HO XBOX OWNERS GOT TO SUIT UP FOR *TOM CLANCY'S Ghost Recon 2* last November, but when it came to the tactical shooter's PC version, someone called the abort code. Had developer Red Storm forgotten *Recon*'s PC roots? "We didn't want to just port something from the Xbox with prettier graphics," says brand manager Adam Novickas. "The console version [of *Ghost Recon 2*] had a different feel that [wouldn't have worked] for PC gamers. Without the time and resources, we had to make a tough decision."

Now, Red Storm is investing its energy in *Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter*. The series' return to the PC means a return to detailed tactical maps, polished graphics, and of course, realistic near-future military gear. An Xbox 360 version is in the works, but what you won't find here is watered-down A.I. or over-the-shoulder console-ish third-person views. Novickas promises that this time "we'll deliver the game that PC players really want"—and ideally, in time for the coming holidays. Your full debriefing follows. / Darren Gladstone



HIT THE DECK!

Every FPS lets you go prone, crouch, and lean around corners. But when was the last time you dived for cover? It's probably the most obvious and realistic thing you'd do in a firefight, and it's being incorporated here. Caught out of position, soldiers can slide on their kneepads or lunge out of harm's way. You, your troops, and the enemy can (and will) use what's in the environment to avoid taking a slug to the chest.



WAR ISN'T PRETTY—OK, MAYBE A LITTLE

Big surprise: *Recon* will look great on your rig. Sure, the Xbox 360 and PC versions are similar when it comes to atmosphere. PC gamers, however, get treated to high dynamic range lighting and advanced shaders that'll drop you in the middle of the hot zone and leave you squinting as you move from shade into the midday sun. *Advanced Warfighter* also takes advantage of advanced physics. This is one of the first games to test the waters of Ageia's physics hardware technology (a separate card, due this winter, that handles in-game physics, allowing for thousands of objects to be manipulated while freeing up the computer to handle other tasks, like A.I.). Early adopters will have an absurd amount of environmental interactivity. Cheapskates: Don't panic. You don't need to go out and buy more hardware to play the game. The NovodeX software physics renderer, which works in conjunction with the physics cards, is potent in its own right and works as well as Havok.

TACTICAL COMMAND

Thanks to modern technology, battlefield command data is always there for you—even in the field. A Cross Com menu lets you command individual members of your four-man squad (more on that on page 36), but the real tactics come into play with your in-helmet aerial schematic of the battle zone. Like previous tactical *Tom Clancy* titles, the overhead map provides a more strategic view of the fight and enables you to give orders when you are away from the battle.

In missions where you control more than one squad, you can set up "Zulu" codes from this screen so you can execute flanking maneuvers midfight without having to call up the overlay map. You aren't just commanding a couple men, though. When the need arises, call in Apache helicopters to swoop in close and provide air support for tactical strikes. And don't forget your eyes in the sky: Unmanned drones remotely soar over the battles and report back the latest intel.

When it comes to tactics, savvy PC strategists can sense weak A.I., and Novickas is pushing for more dedication to tweaking bots. A.I. gets further improvement for PCs, and the key to this is making the actions of the enemy more challenging and believable. Methodical bots will not succumb to cheap tactics. If they see your drone, they'll shoot it out of the sky and then call in reinforcements to hunt you down. You'll hear enemies communicate with each other in the field, and if they get into trouble, Novickas says they have an eerie drive for self-preservation. To emphasize the point, a number of soldiers are dropped into the middle of a car-strewn street. As vehicles blow up or get moved, the A.I. reacts to events and looks for safe ground.

This is all well and good for single-player campaigns, but what does it mean for Internet gaming? Well, the team isn't ready to talk about that area just yet, as its plans are nowhere near final. Novickas did, however, cough up that "there will be PC-exclusive modes that focus more on tactics and strategy. Obviously, we're not trying to be *Battlefield* 2," he laughs. "The fights [in *Advanced Warfighter*] are smaller and more intense." While there's no official word on persistent stat tracking (à la *BF2*), we did learn that Red Storm is considering a sort of commander mode that puts one player in the command center to issue orders.

Novickas and the team also recognize that "the online community is what gives our games a long life, and we plan to support them." Tools will be made available for would-be gamemakers and, from the look of early demos, they could be as simple to use as Crytek's *Far Cry* kit. The editor works in-game, so you can see exactly what your changes on the map are doing to the game world.



HOLLOW RED DIAMONDS:
Spotted enemies

BLUE CIRCLE WITH WHITE DOT:
The console cursor

HOLLOW BLUE CIRCLE + TRIANGLE:
You—the triangle shows your view direction and angle

HOLLOW GREEN DIAMONDS + TRIANGLE:
The rest of the Ghost team and their view directions and angles

WAYPOINT MARKER:
From this map you can manually set waypoints and give the "Go" command

UNIVERSAL SOLDIER

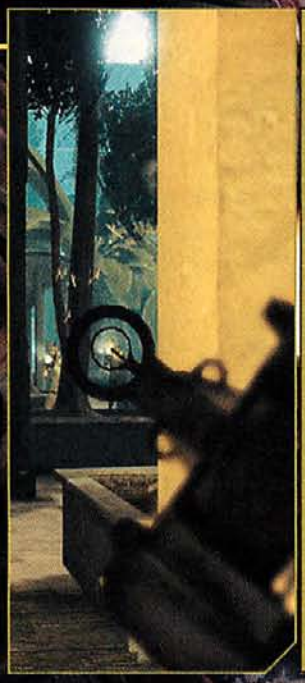
You may look at the technology here and think, "Yeah, maybe I'd see this in *Aliens* or *Starship Troopers*," but this is all real and it's being field-tested today. Don't believe us? Check out the U.S. Army's Future Force Warrior program at www.natick.army.mil/soldier/wsit.

Tomorrow's troops will be equipped with a high-resolution display—the Cross Com monocle. Satellite and real-time data is fed to the eyepiece, and thanks to helmet cams, it's easy to keep track of squad members and see what they're seeing. You also have a free-roaming UAV drone that you can deploy to ferret out enemy positions. Instant communication and instant access to everything happening on the battlefield is what will keep your team alive. *Advanced Warrior* is doing a pretty thorough job of putting you in a Ghost's khakis.

That doesn't mean all the kinks have been worked out by 2013. The Ghosts are one of the few teams field-testing this new gear, and they just so happen to be in Mexico City as things get grim. Careful not to spill too much about the single-player campaign, Novickas warns that at one point your gear will actually break down and you'll have to go back to communicating in more "primitive" ways. You know, like actually talking. What gets us thinking, though, is how good a training tool this game could be for next-generation soldiers.







FUTURE FIREPOWER

You can't stop terrorists with kind words. Fortunately, numerous new weapons bolster America's arsenal. Here's a taste of what's to come.

FN SCAR AND HECKLER & KOCH XM8 RIFLES A modular rifle, the XM8 will become the backbone of future fighting forces. The U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM), though, has more specific needs and wanted a modular rifle that could accommodate various caliber shells. With the SCAR, you can modify the rifle for various sniping or assault purposes and grab clips from fallen enemies—even if they're using AK-47s.

XM-29 This experimental weapon is camera equipped so that it can shoot around corners. The camera is mounted on the gun, and it sends the image to the soldier's monocle. Now you can get a first-person view of your weapon in the real world, too!

"COUNTERSNIPE" RIFLE While Novickas didn't have its number designation on hand, this weapon will allow combatants to see through walls. Then, equipped with high-caliber ammunition, snipers can penetrate obstructions to eliminate hiding targets.

GOOD VS. EVIL

PLAYER VS. PLAYER



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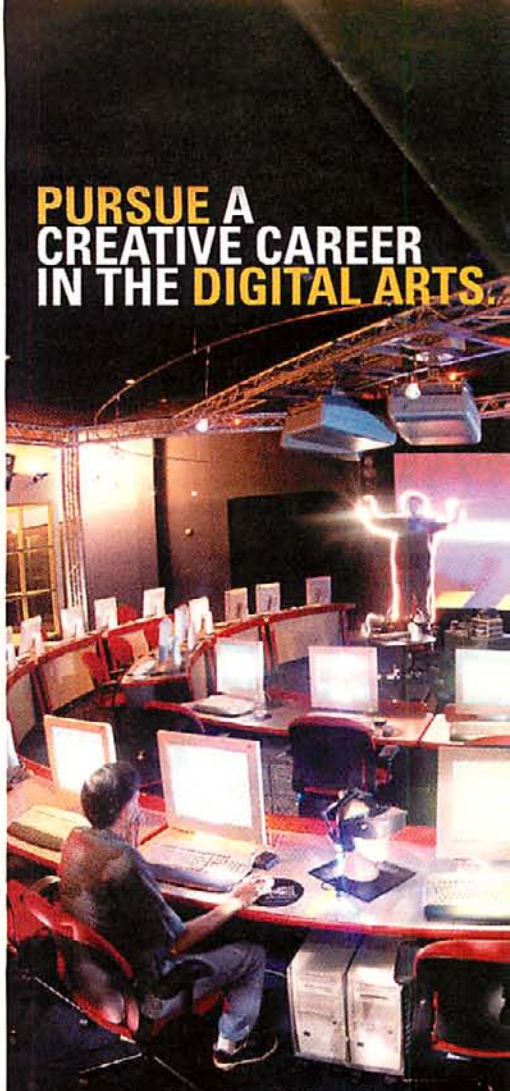
Can 16 people play well together? We tried to do just that in *Serious Sam II*

PUBLISHER: **2K Games** DEVELOPER: **Croteam** GENRE: **Shooter** RELEASE DATE: **Out Now**

CO-OP HANDS-ON

You can never have too much of a good thing. Or can you? If ever a game put that saying to the test, it's *Serious Sam II*. Following its predecessor's well-deserved reputation for over-the-top action, this sequel gets a pure shot of BALCO-grade steroids with 16-player cooperative play. (Well, *Computer Gaming World*'s playtest was cooperative until someone turned on the friendly fire option.) Words like "insane" fail to describe the utter chaos that ensues when a full group of fraggers takes on this game's ginormous horde of monsters.

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WINDOW DRESSING

One editor puts his PC on the line to test Windows Vista, Beta 1

A DEEP, AUDIBLE GULP COMES FROM somewhere as the install disc drops into the tray. What am I thinking, putting Beta 1 of an untested operating system—Windows Vista, the upcoming successor to Windows XP—on my computer? Well, it promises right here in the Vista reviewers' guide that there will be "less downtime, fewer IT hassles, and greater productivity."

It's time to put your money where your mouth is, Microsoft. Writing an entire article in the new OS without backing it up is the tech equivalent of operating without a net. Well, here goes nothing.

WHY WINDOWS VISTA?
You get a great view of the world out a window! Get it? Hey, at least they didn't call it Bob.

VISTA: THE IT BUILD

Being a beta (and an IT-centric beta, at that), this Vista has a number of things that may not be of much interest to the average gamer. It also doesn't help that since this is such an early version of the new Windows—build No. 5112, to be precise—a lot of stuff that *will* affect the gaming crowd hasn't been included yet. Nevertheless, since the OS will replace XP and will, therefore, affect all of our PC-centric lives in the near future, we dug right in.

With Vista, things are supposed to be different right at start-up. Microsoft promises a responsive OS that'll fire up quickly, so long as you've got at least 512MB of RAM. Our test computer, a basic 2.8GHz Intel PC with 768MB RAM, went from off to ready in about 45 seconds—a full 20 seconds faster than the same machine running Windows XP. Taking it a step further, a fresh top-of-the line monster machine with 1GB of RAM took longer to load XP than the less-powerful rig took to get Vista running.

MS OS X

Once it boots up, the Windows interface itself isn't all too dissimilar to what you're already used to seeing...on a Mac. Hey, not complaining here, just pointing out the obvious. Seriously, though, right now it looks more like a finely tuned Windows XP with a few Mac inspirations thrown in. The whole point here was to streamline and give the OS a polish—and give games a higher profile.

In Vista, you don't dig to find files. Contextual search tools are everywhere. Even the top navigation inside Windows lets you quickly jump up or down levels and see the folders you're working in. The real fun, though, comes when you click the Start button.

A contextual search bar is right there. Typing in "do" calls up all the programs on your PC that start with those two letters, and up pop the shortcuts you're looking for. For those using Google's experimental Gmail, it's not too far off from what you see happening there. The next thing you'll notice is the Games folder, on the Start menu next to My Documents and the all-important shortcut to Music. It's official: Gamers are no longer second-class citizens.

The Games link opens up a whole directory housing shortcuts to everything from *Solitaire* to *Doom 3*. It will become your hub. The best way to describe the layout is to compare it to *Media Player 10*. Inside the window, you'll see a game's box art, ESRB rating, and publisher and developer credits. A back-end server, similar to the CDDB system that gives you music info, provides basic credits for each game. Mr. Gates and friends: You need to contact Mobygames.com. That website is an incredible database of gaming information, box art, and screens dating back to Apple II titles.

Making gaming a big part of the OS could, in theory, make this a big target for advocate groups who want to crack down on gaming. Thankfully, parental controls for Windows Vista have been in the works for a long time now. The admin account on your computer can set all sorts of playing parameters as determined by the ESRB. Only want the kids to play E-rated games? Click a button. You've just shut the tykes out of *Half-Life 2*. Then there's the activity logger that allows you to see everything that they tried to access (see sidebar on p. 70 for more). Want to lay down the law that Junior ›

1 Every single window presents you with as much relevant information as possible. On the other hand, if you're a stickler for the old school, you can get "classic" views.

2 Notice how all the relevant gaming links within the OS are linked together inside the Games folder? Everything from hardware and parental controls to Add/Remove Programs is right here. Smart, eh?

3 Everything is searchable in the new OS! You don't need to mouse all over the place; have the shortcut links come to you!



4 This link on the Start menu is your gateway to gaming. After all these years, MS finally sees games as more than just *Minesweeper* and *FreeCell*.

5 The entire OS is searchable, so make your life easier. Tag and categorize files. Then, as in *Media Player 10*, you can even rate a file's usefulness. We can't wait to rate each other's *Word* documents! Whee!

6 Enjoy these nifty Mac OS–like desktop effects, courtesy of Microsoft's Aero user experience. See? Aren't you glad you got that $500 graphics card now?

For the Five IT Administrators Reading CGW for Networking Advice

Here's the high-level breakdown of this build: Security is fundamental. Whether it's utilizing firewalls, offering protection from malware, or just making sure your kids don't screw up the PC while you're away, Vista promises to have your back.

Also, networking and connectivity go hand in hand, and that's another big part of the new Windows. It already looks a hell of a lot easier to set up a wireless network. A Bluetooth-like discovery mode lets you see people with Wi-Fi support and easily check off whether you want to allow them access to your network.

» VISTA LOOKS LIKE A FINELY TUNED WINDOWS XP WITH SOME MAC INSPIRATIONS.

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TEEN T Violence CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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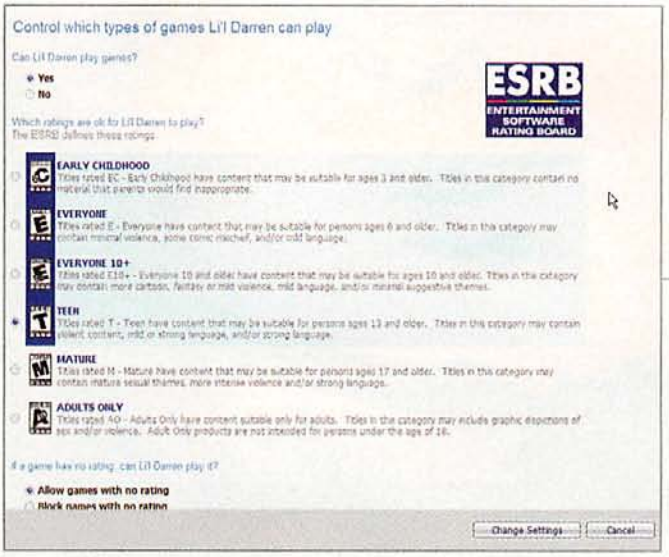
can only play between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. after school? Done. Let's say you don't want him to play any T-rated games that have the use of alcohol; you can lock those out as well. As long as the ESRB tracks it, Vista can block it.

These, sadly, are the only gaming-centric parts of this build of Vista. Now for a couple game tests: *World of WarCraft* played without a hitch thanks to ATI's beta drivers. Reflective surfaces like poles in *Half-Life 2*'s City 17, on the other hand, looked opaque. *Doom 3* spelled doom for Vista, but to be fair, there are "known issues" with that game, possibly because it makes calls outside of DirectX.

But who are we to complain? Microsoft isn't exactly shipping the OS tomorrow—more like the end of 2006, if even that early. Expect more-detailed coverage here in *CGW* when Beta 2 comes out. For now, though, we're done. One day, a few minor driver issues, and a game crash later, we survived. Time to hit Save. / Darren Gladstone



1 For the sake of our little example, Papa Gladstone sure is tired of working. He wants to unwind a little and maybe play *Doom 3* for a little bit before the kids get home. You'll notice in the information bar that he last played the game at 10:52 in the morning. Get a life, man!



2 Now Papa, being a stickler for the rules, doesn't want Li'l Darren getting all corrupted by playing some of those nasty videogames. So he opens up the parental controls and selects a number of ways to keep Mini-D on the straight and narrow. Papa can outright block all or certain games from being accessible. He can select the acceptable game-rating level. Basically, if the ESRB tracks it, you can block it from young, impressionable 33-year-olds.



3 *Solitaire* and *Doom 3*, two of the more insidious games out there, are blocked. Still, try as he might, young Darren double-clicks the icon in hopes of playing the game. Busted! No dice, kiddo. Worse (for the kid) is that Vista tracks his actions and gives a full report to dad.

COMING UP IN BETA 2... HOPEFULLY

WINSAT

When done, Vista will ship with the Windows Assessment Tool (WinSAT). It isn't available yet, but this applet will be one of the keys to better game performance. WinSAT is a logging tool that automatically scales the OS and games for your PC. It works something like this:

As a game installs, WinSAT polls the game and even tests (offscreen) the performance levels of your graphics card. How many onscreen objects can your system handle? Does the machine have a physics accelerator card or multicore CPU? You get the idea. That information is stored in the background and WinSAT, knowing exactly what your machine is capable of, optimizes each game so that you'll get the best experience possible. It won't run in the background the whole time, but it is capable of detecting major performance drops. It'll pinpoint new installs or malware that is screwing things up.

DIRECTX 10

Here's something to chew on: The next-gen game consoles will effectively be working off of DirectX 9+. PC games are going to get a hell of a lot better. At Vista's launch, there will be support for DX10 and a legacy version of DX9. The specs are still in flux and are only being shown to developers at this early stage, but what we do know is that the focus is on stability and removing old, unnecessary parts of the application program interface. There will also be strict requirements for future 3D cards. These cards will need a new geometry shader function and common shader core between pixel and vertices for unprecedented levels of detail.

ONE DAY, A FEW MINOR DRIVER ISSUES, AND A GAME CRASH LATER. WE SURVIVED. TIME TO HIT SAVE.

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FRAGLAND

The game of attending QuakeCon—and surviving

THE RULES

It was 10 years ago that a tribe of 30 hardcore gamers first gathered at a Best Western in Garland, Texas to play *Quake* and *Doom* for the whole weekend. What started out so small has since become "four days of peace, love, and rockets" at the Woodstock of gaming. QuakeCon has grown into a huge geek party, a festival for the hardcore. Activision brings out its big guns to show off new titles to the faithful while hardware manufacturers trot out the new goods for the gearheads. People travel from all over the world to compete for prizes (prize money this year totaled $150,000) and props, or to simply hang with a bunch of like-minded folks. An estimated 6,000 gamers are on hand to play and party day-in, day-out for 96 straight hours. Couldn't make it to Texas for the festivities? Don't worry, just grab some dice and play along at home. The first one to make it out of the Gaylord Texan Resort and Convention Center with both liver and sanity intact is the winner.

/ Darren Gladstone

NO:	YES:
⊘ FOOD OR DRINK	✓ BATHING
⊘ COOLERS WITH ICE	✓ DEODORANT
⊘ SPEAKERS	✓ FUN!
⊘ NETWORKING CABLES	
⊘ SWITCHES, HUBS, ROUTERS	
⊘ SECOND COMPUTER	
⊘ SECOND N.I.C. IN ONE COMPUTER	
⊘ DAISY CHAINING POWER STRIPS	
⊘ SMOKING	
⊘ DRUGS	
⊘ WEAPONS	
⊘ FIREWORKS	
⊘ CHEATING	



DOOM: THE MOVIE!

Question: Will film critics complain that the movie has "monster closets?" Fans were treated to a roundtable discussion and showing of the first-person view segment (pictured here, the sequence was done entirely in one shot). Id Software's Todd Hollenshead talked about visiting the interactive set that made him feel as though he was in the game. However, the real highlight was hearing Hollenshead say, "Universal found duct tape on Mars."



QUAKE 4 MULTIPLAYER!

First off, there are no vehicles in *Quake 4* multiplayer! This is strictly old-school action, inspired by *Quake III: Arena*. "But," Raven Software's Brian Raffel muses, "we can't stop modders from creating a mech deathmatch level." What we are looking at right now are eight or nine DM maps, five capture the flag maps where one side is Stroggs and the other is Marines (the difference between the two teams is strictly superficial), one tournament map, and arena CTF.

For the sake of QuakeCon, 12 players (the game should support 16 by launch) squared off on the Fragging Yard map. Here are some pointers: 1) The zoom scope on the machine gun does more damage. 2) Learn to lead targets with the nail gun. 3) The hyperblaster is good in tight firefights. 4) Don't call the best player a "li'l bitch." He may single you out.

START!
PEOPLE LINE UP A DAY EARLY!





Someone remixed the *Doom 3* music. Sweet! Slap on headphones and miss a turn.

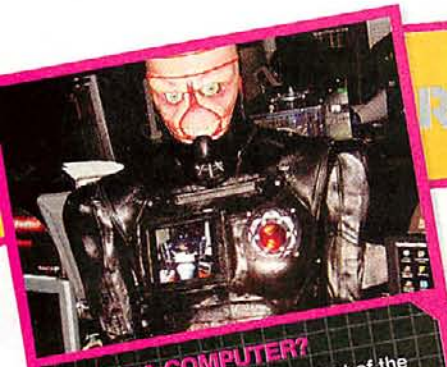
Serious Sam II multiplayer? Here? Sixteen-player co-op is sick! Lose one hour.

Take aspirin after absorbing everything Carmack says. Miss a turn.

See a demo of Xbox 360 *Quake 4*. Move ahead one. Fast.

See a demo of *Ultimate Spider-Man*. Pay $50 to reserve a copy. NOW!

Chow time! Domino's delivery guy is beat but making a killing. Pay $10.



THAT'S A COMPUTER?

Welcome, friends, to the hardest of the h4rdc0r3. Case modders aren't satisfied with buying some prefeb box from Dell. These nuts build everything from scratch. Take Troy Fryfogle. Watching the *Hellraiser* movies wasn't enough for this maniac. Troy started working on Project Lament—his own gaming Cenobite PC. His sweet rig snagged $2,500 in the mod competition.



READY TO RUMBLE

Behold the new *Doom 3* champ: Gopher! In a tense match he beat back Rocketboy to secure the $25,000 prize. PURRI walked away with $10,000 for winning the *Quake II* retro deathmatch and u96d/check6 controlled *Enemy Territory* to the tune of $25,000. We were also starting to wonder why so many women were at the show this year until we remembered that the organizers started a Ms. QuakeCon competition. Personally, I think the champion should be champ, regardless of gender.

Nevertheless, you can't argue with results. The Girlz of Destruction clan pwn3d all, taking first, second, and third prize—$30 grand in total prize money.





TOTAL INSANITY

How far are you willing to go to get a new, top-of-the-line, $500-plus graphics card? Nvidia posed that question one night during QuakeCon with some frightening results. Attendees ate raw onions, wolfed down jars of peanut butter, and volunteered their girlfriends to get their heads shaved. One maniac downed a striped-bass smoothie for a new Dell notebook! Moreover, two poor bastards had to do the Macarena throughout the entire event. Its at times like this that you appreciate working at a magazine and getting your graphics cards free.





ID'S JOHN CARMACK SPEAKS

Anybody who recreationally talks about building a rocket ship is bound to see things on a whole other level.

"Everyone is saturated with the hype of the new consoles," he starts, "and they will become more important. Now, more than ever, we can essentially target the Xbox 360, PS3, and PC with more or less a common code base." The big shocker was that he said initial work will start with the XB360 on all games going forward. He loves the development platform (he can code closer to the core) and says that it makes thing easy to port over. "There's always the trade-off on the PC of flexibility versus rigid consoles." It's much easier to code for the console and beef up for the PC.

What about multicore processing? "Game code is nasty...and especially harsh for multicore," says Carmack. "Early on, the results will be ugly...and the big advances won't come until the generation beyond the Xbox 360 and PS3."



WINNER! YOU SURVIVED QUAKECON

Sneak in some hands-on time with *Stubbs the Zombie*. Miss one turn.

Play against Fatal1ty. Lose 21-0. Limp ahead one.



FATAL1TY MEANS BUS1NESS

A lot happens during QuakeCon for someone like Johnathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel. The pro gamer says that he pulls in close to $300,000 a year, and obviously, QuakeCon feels a bit like an Old Western gunfight for him at this point—someone new is always looking to take him down wherever he goes. Sitting out QuakeCon's big-money tournaments this year, Fatal1ty held a competition of his own to see if anyone could score one kill against him. I couldn't, but I did take one of his cardboard cutouts (which were littering the show floor) out for drinks.

Wendel promoted his branded X-Fi soundcards and talked about working closely with Creative on other products—namely, a tournament-worthy mouse that he'll help design. Not too shabby for a kid who never finished college.



Photos provided by Andy "TekieB" Babin, Andrew "Prognar" Campbell, Tom "tomServo" Cook, Chris "DaFragsta" Sparks, and Robin "RobN8R" Walker. Thanks to them and the rest of the QuakeCon volunteers.

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FIGURES

Mage Knight 2.0 Starter Set

$20 MAGEKNIGHT.COM

Reviews editor Ryan Scott took a sneak peek at *Mage Knight: Apocalypse* during a recent visit to Namco, and it's continuing to shape up. Want to get a feel for what the *MK* universe is all about? Let the action ensue with the Mage Knight 2.0 Starter Set, which is part *Magic: The Gathering*, part action-figure collection.



RINGER

Ring Thing

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MUSIC

DM & Jemini: Ghetto Pop Life

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Danger Mouse is a turntable master: He produces tight hooks, good beats, and a sound you can pick out anywhere. You may have heard his work on the Gorillaz's new disc, *Demon Days*, but that's just a small taste of what DM has accomplished here. Partner-in-crime Jemini serves up the lyrics that make tracks like "The Only One," "Ghetto Pop Life," and "Don't Do Drugs" move you. Check out www.dangermousesite.com for free tracks and samples.



PULP

Infinite Crisis

$4 DCCOMICS.COM

A chain of events in DC comicdom over the past year has been leading up to this moment. Something serious is about to go down, and we hear one classic character is on his or her way to comic heaven (our guess: Wonder Woman). After this limited series finishes up, the entire DC universe skips forward one year, and the survivors are still picking up the pieces.



TOOL

Utili-Key

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Any self-respecting geek feels naked without at least some gadget on his person at all times. And what better way to go MacGyver style than with a handy tool that hangs on your key chain? A Leatherman is nice, but check out this six-in-one tool. It looks like a key, but as soon as you unfold it, you've got everything you need to crack open your PC.



DVD

Family Guy Presents Stewie Griffin—The Untold Story

$16 AMAZON.COM

We dare you to find a funnier show on TV right now than *Family Guy* (and if you do, tell us what it is, please). This straight-to-DVD release is basically a movie-length episode that features evil baby genius Stewie Griffin on a search for a man who looks strangely like him. Could it be his real father?



BOOK

The Arcanum

$10.50 AMAZON.COM

Bet you didn't know Harry Houdini, H.P. Lovecraft, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle were partners in a secret society that fought demons. Yeah...neither did we. Take a walking tour of New York City circa 1919 during the investigation of a series of occult murders. And after playing *Indigo Prophecy*, we've gotta ask: What's the deal with NYC and the occult? Back to the topic, though, historical sticklers will get bent out of shape, but this is a good, quick, light read.



MOVIE

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

$7.50 MATINEE

Editor-in-chief Jeff Green is going to be the first to call in sick so that he can see this movie on opening day... although we're not sure if he's going because he devours all the books as they come out or because he enjoys watching Harry, Hermione, and Ron all grow up on the big screen.



BRB

Internet Urinal

$4 THINKGEEK.COM

First, *EverQuest* offered up in-game commands for pizza deliveries. Now, in a move to make sure you never need to get off your duff again, we've got the Internet Urinal. Yes, folks, now you can take care of all your biological needs without ever missing those precious online moments. And, as the website is keen to point out, you finally get your own IP space!

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PIPELINE

Save some money for these upcoming games

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25 to Life	Eidos Interactive
Age of Empires III	Microsoft
Black & White 2	Electronic Arts
Brothers in Arms: Earned in Blood	Ubisoft
Call of Duty 2	Activision
City of Villains	NCsoft
F.E.A.R.	VU Games
Heroes of the Pacific	Red Mile
Jaws Unleashed	Majesco
Missing: Game of the Year Edition	DreamCatcher
Serious Sam II	2K Games
Shattered Union	2K Games
Stacked With Daniel Negreanu	Myelin Media
Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse	Aspyr
The Movies	Activision
TimeShift	Atari
NOVEMBER 2005	
Auto Assault	NCsoft
Battlefield 2: Special Forces	Electronic Arts
Civilization IV	2K Games
Conflict: Global Terror	2K Games
Dynasty Warriors 4	Koei
Ghost Recon Advanced Warfighter	Ubisoft
Gun	Activision
Hammer & Sickle	CDV Software
Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire	Electronic Arts
Star Wars Battlefront II	LucasArts
The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe	Buena Vista
The Matrix: Path of Neo	Atari
DECEMBER 2005	
King Kong	Ubisoft
The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth II	Electronic Arts
FALL/WINTER 2005	
America's Army: Special Forces Overmatch	U.S. Army
Crime Life: Gang Wars	Konami
Dominions III	Shrapnel Games
Full Spectrum Warrior: Ten Hammers	THQ
NBA Live 06	Electronic Arts
Need for Speed: Most Wanted	Electronic Arts
NHL 06	Electronic Arts
NHL: Eastside Hockey Manager 2005	Sega
Quake 4	Activision
SUN: Soul of the Ultimate Nation	Webzen
The Apprentice	Legacy Interactive
The Incredibles: Rise of the Underminer	THQ
TOCA Race Driver 2006	Codemasters
TrackMania Sunrise eXtreme	Enlight
Vietcong 2	2K Games

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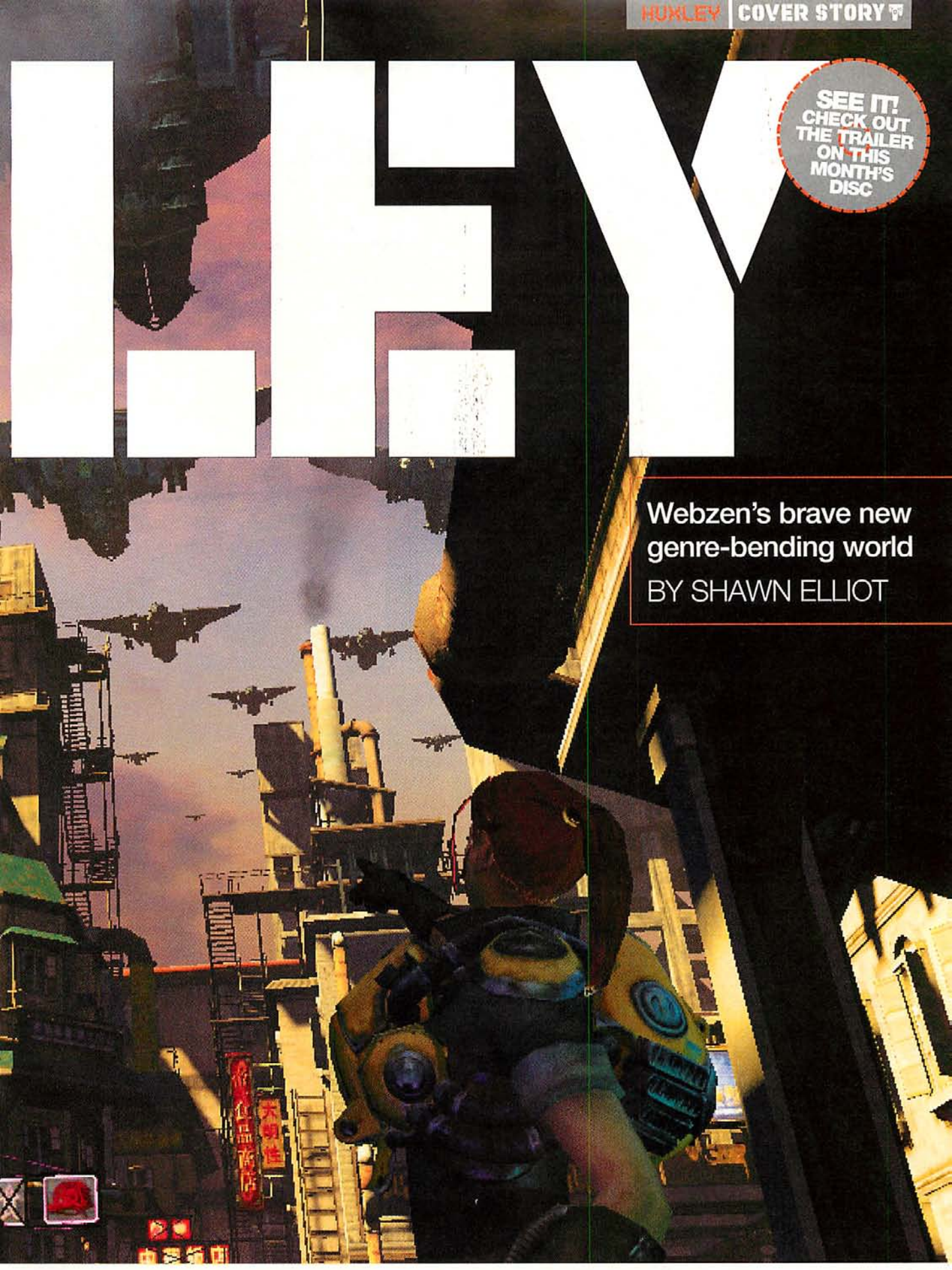
A FIRE-IN-THE-SKY CATACLYSM SPARKS a new era of shared existence between surviving Sapiens and their swifter, sturdier, stronger offshoots, a species of genetically gifted Alternatives. Confined to separate city-states (read: servers), each species' citizens buy and sell, swap and barter. They swagger and chat on street corners, scheme and build alliances in back alleys. And—their eyes on a limited source of a new, near-limitless energy—each species leaves its sprawling sanctuary to wage war in the wilds. Welcome to the brave new genre-bending world of massively multiplayer online first-person shooter *Huxley.*

H.U.X.L.E.Y

SEE IT! CHECK OUT THE TRAILER ON THIS MONTH'S DISC

Webzen's brave new genre-bending world

BY SHAWN ELLIOT



NOW ENTERING NOSTALONIA: POPULATION 5,000

It all begins in the big city, a busy hub to everything *Huxley* has to offer. From here your one-of-a-kind character colludes with friends and conspires against foes, settles in and sets off to war.

COST OF LIVING

Pay to play or free upon purchase? Webzen still hasn't decided on *Huxley*'s pricing plan.



2 COOPERATION, PAGE 84

Offers for class- and cash-boosting cooperative missions arrive via e-mail notices and Nostalonia's nonplayable citizens.

AN MMO FOR FPS PLAYERS

- **SOMETHING TO SHOW FOR YOUR SPOT-ON SHOOTING:** Persistent characters accumulate power and prestige.
- **GET FRIENDLY BEFORE YOU FRAG:** Buddy up with brothers in arms in cooperative campaigns before challenging clans.
- **WORTH DYING FOR:** Your faction's successes (and failures) shape *Huxley*'s story.

AN FPS FOR MMO PLAYERS

- **TWITCH-BASED BRAGGING RIGHTS:** Superhuman reflexes work hand in hand with on-the-fly strategy.
- **A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE:** Through-your-own-eyes immersion meets rig-melting resolution.
- **HAVE AT IT YOUR WAY:** A wide variety of weapon settings (e.g., substituting ease-of-use for lethality) lets troopers tune and tweak to suit varying skill levels.



1 COMMUNITY, PAGE 82
Citizens mix, mingle, shop, and swap in the city's swarming immensity. Wealthier types traverse it in their own vehicles.



3 COMPETITION, PAGE 86
Enlist in an existing clan or recruit members for your own. Then, enter battle areas to wage online war for the world's remaining energy source.

COMMUNITY

TODAY, THE SAPIEN CITY OF Nostalonia's streets and squares and transfer stations are still. (Korean developer Webzen's urban planners won't zone their metropolis of tomorrow for residency until sometime in '06.) And yet it all looks lived in, as if citizens have only just shuttered their windows and caged their shops under curfew. A hot evening glow bathes upper stories and roofs in light, balconies and cornices contrasting sharply with the drab facades beneath. It's a mash-up of modern science and old-timey steamworks, of Western symmetry and Eastern neon.

Lead designer Sang Hun Kim asks us to picture stragglers leaning against streetlamps on the edges of sidewalks, to imagine sharing the space with 5,000-some other occupants and scores of nonplayable characters (NPCs), much as MMORPG players in *World of WarCraft* and *Guild Wars* do. To the first-person aficionado whose worlds often exist largely to wage war in, day one is disorienting. Tolls and limited transportation prevent recent arrivals from losing their way in the city's 50 labyrinthine square blocks, but its densely developed boroughs are daunting. Accommodating NPCs offer tourist-safe itineraries, but this is your home, and it's only other human inhabitants who have the street smarts you'll need to survive.

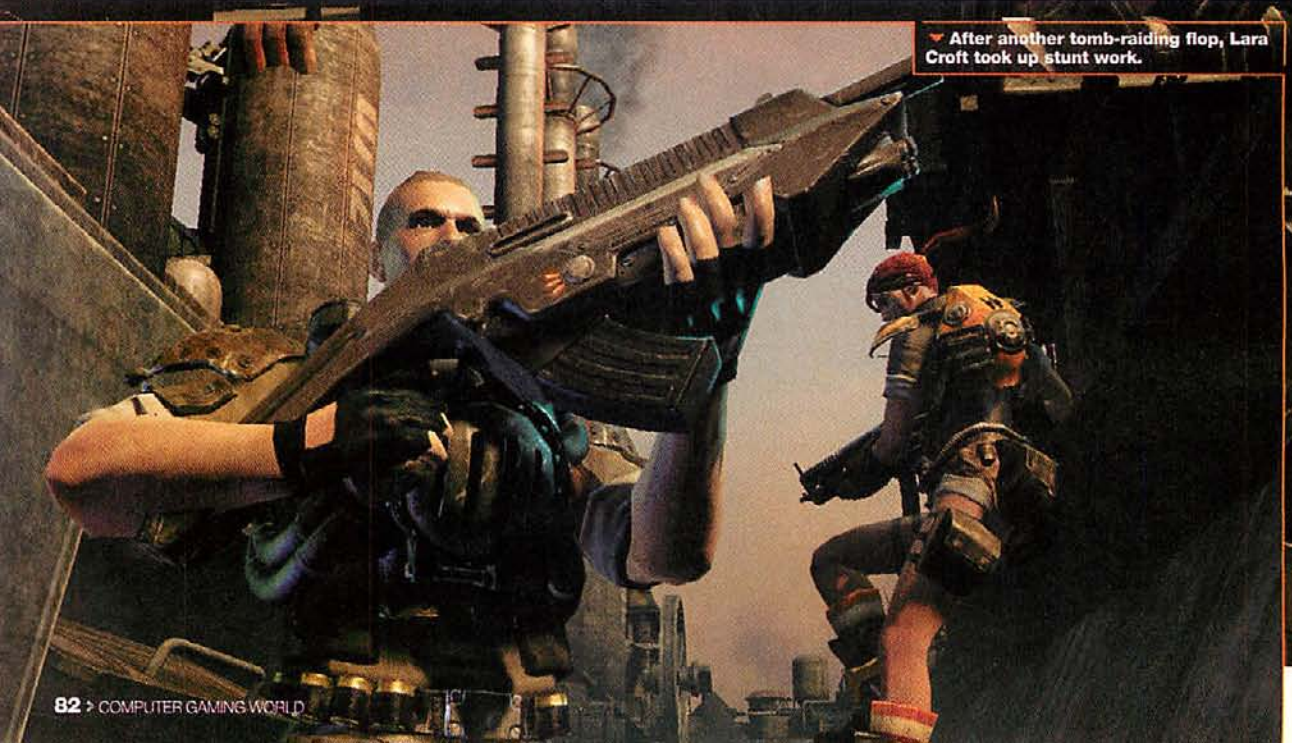
COVET THY NEIGHBOR

Citizens in the streets of this Sapien city-to-be (pick the Alternative path and you'll live in that species' capital, "a cyberpunk answer to the Sapiens' steampunk aesthetics," says Kim) traffic in small talk. Snippets of chitchat hint at conspiracies in conspiracies—often involving Huxley, a behind-the-curtain scientist—and violent run-ins with so-called Hybrids (see box). Often, we imagine, an object-obsessed citizenry asks, "Where'd he get that?" and "How can I get one?"

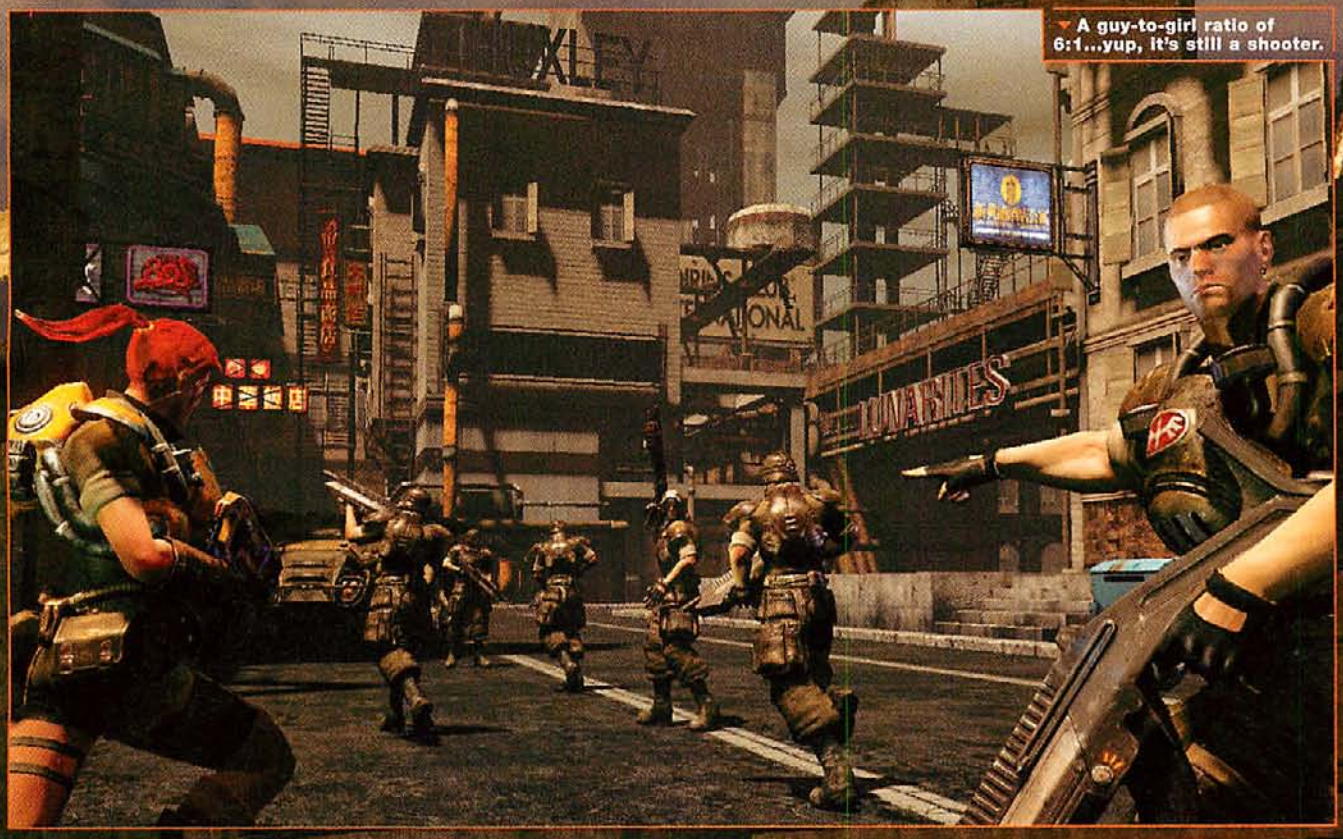
"Koreans and Chinese don't demand a lot of diversity in their characters' appearances," says Kim, "but North Americans—who we're designing *Huxley* for—are different, which is why we're letting you customize your character's facial features, hairstyle, and fashion." When a tall-walking clan of champions swaggers by in tailor-made helmets and armor, you tend to talk. And when you see that the group has its own hall of heroes, clan flag flying overhead, it's settled: You have to be one of the kids who's doing his own thing.

In the meantime, however, affluence accumulates incrementally. No longer tethered just to the places your feet can take you, you begin taking trains to new sections of the buyosphere, and soon after, you find your own set of wheels. Your apartment (a virtual space accessed via menu, unlike the top-ranking clans' actual command centers) fills with boots, gloves, guns, and war booty. But first you've got to make money....

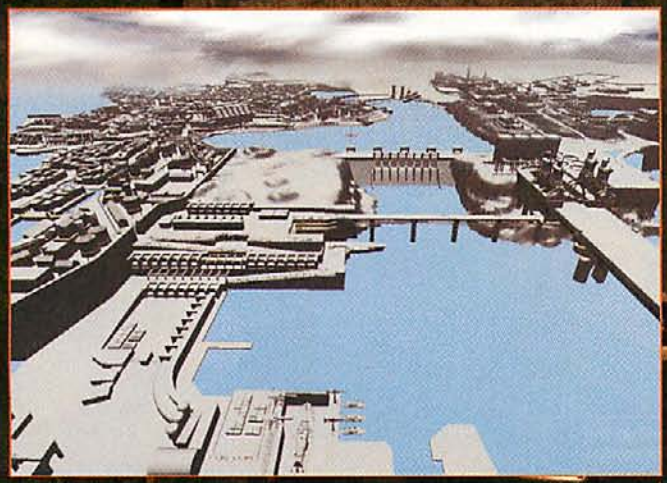
>> SNIPPETS OF CHITCHAT HINT AT CONSPIRACIES IN CONSPIRACIES.



After another tomb-raiding flop, Lara Croft took up stunt work.



A guy-to-girl ratio of 6:1...yup, it's still a shooter.





Encompassing industrial districts, uptown malls, and seaside developments, Sapien and Alternative metropolises stretch for miles.



ALTERNATIVES

Children of the postapocalyptic atom, Alternatives created a city called Eska in the ashes of Eastern Europe.



SAPIENS

One of *Huxley*'s two playable races, along with Alternatives (right), Sapiens are surviving humans who find sanctuary in Nostalonia, a city-state combining old and new architecture and Eastern and Western culture.

HYBRIDS

Said to be the sterile offspring of Sapien-Alternative cross-species pairings, nonplayable Hybrids haunt *Huxley*'s underground.



CLASS ACTIONS

Status matters, but as Kim has it, *Huxley*'s not a stratified society of entitled haves and envious have-nots: "We encourage cross-class party play. Higher-level players get experience points for helping out lower-level players, and the bigger the level gap, the bigger the bonus."





Some missions take you within the walls of the opposing faction's capital.

COOPERATION

2 NOSTALONIA'S UNEMPLOYMENT RATE is nil. Sort through the hubbub (*Huxley's* hobnobbing citizens lounge and gesture on command like MMORPG idlers), make your name known among NPC brokers and mercs and middlemen, and your e-mail inbox begins to bulge with assignments.

Often, entry-level wet work has to do with hunting Hybrids—morlock-like misfits who venture to the surface in smash-and-grab gangs. "Say that Hybrids swipe a weapons cache from a supplier," Kim says. "You'll then need to either put together a party or hire [computer-controlled] mercenaries to track them down and get the guns back." Players collaborate closely, but combat is the priority, not puzzles. "Design by numbers says all 10 players in a party need to stand on pressure plates to open a door or disarm a trap. We do it differently. One goal might be to get everyone in a group across a bridge while staving off hordes of Hybrids. You can't all go at once—success requires strategy, communication, and coordination. It takes fast trigger fingers and faster thinking."

"Striking action, speed, and stability are at the heart of *Huxley*," Kim continues. "We prefer *Unreal Tournament*'s twitch play to the slower, more plodding pace of some military shooters. And that, of course, calls for sure-fire stability, which is why we're wedding Unreal Engine 3 with Webzen's own networking and server technology. At the same time, we want more. We want players to start living new lives in the postapocalyptic world we're creating, a world of continuous change in which characters grow and form the communities you get in other MMOs."

BUILDING CHARACTER

After Hybrid hunts or other knottier capers, you'll find yourself flush with cash and no shortage of outlets in which to spend it. Brick-and-mortar shopping, impromptu person-to-person transactions, and supervised, taxable trading all figure into *Huxley*'s consumer economy.

Commodities include single-use articles (e.g., amplified radar) and guns—gobs and gobs of guns. "One of our babies—call it the delayed-action sniper rifle—shoots time-bomb bullets," Kim says. "Get hit, and you'll hear a beeping sound for five seconds and then blow up. Plus, when one player takes a slug, other party members can hear the countdown, too—it puts 'em into a panic as they try to sort out who bit the bullet and get clear before it goes boom."

While purchasing power gets you gear, it's all-important experience points—also acquired in combat—that let you equip it. According to Kim, "*Huxley*'s level system isn't the same as those in most MMOs. First, we're setting the initial level cap at 50. Then every 10 levels comprise a class (the first class is levels 1 though 10, second class is levels 11 through 20, etc.)." It's when you change classes that you gain the licenses that let you use additional guns, gear, and gadgets. Still, even slight differences in damage and defense can upset a hyperactive shooter like *Huxley*, so you won't see a dramatic disparity between lower- and higher-level players. "Regular RPG growth systems make no sense in FPSes," Kim says. "You know, why should someone do more damage because he's 'stronger' than an opponent using the same weapon?"

"WE PREFER UNREAL TOURNAMENT'S TWITCH PLAY TO THE SLOWER, MORE PLODDING PACE OF SOME MILITARY SHOOTERS."

–LEAD DESIGNER, SANG HUN KIM



STANDING ON THE SHOULDERS OF GAS GIANTS

Didn't *PlanetSide* patent the supersized, persistent-world shooter? Not so, says *Huxley*'s lead designer Sang Hun Kim: "We're making the first true MMOFPS. Sony's game was good—we hold its strategy and innovation in the highest regard and have spent long hours in it—but it lacked the intensity and twitch factor of stuff like *Unreal Tournament* or *Quake*. *Huxley*'s PVP is fast and powerful. We're placing more weight on players' skill than on their characters' stats so that a talented player can prevail over a better-armed enemy, even with a basic rifle. Plus, we're offering compelling single-player and cooperative components along with extensive community support. *Huxley* is huge, a persistent world where players own individual housing, interact with NPCs, and build relationships with other users. Its narrative and gameplay connect naturally to each player's growth. You won't find these features in *PlanetSide*."



COMPETITION.

IN THE WILDS BEYOND THE CITY'S WALLS, WAR-BATTERED trees stand like scarecrows in saw grass. Beneath, mining stations extract the rare, energy-yielding Lunarite resource; above, armies amass here and there—at first in high-flying fast-attack craft and then in dropship-deposited armored personnel carriers.

While cooperative campaigning earns experience and cash, 120-player army-versus-army clashes (*Huxley*'s PVP solution) buy bragging rights and rank. "Communication and coordination are crucial," Kim says, and the best way to assure you'll have both is to organize yourselves in fighting outfits, "to create—and recruit for—your own clans. If most members arrive at a war zone wielding rocket launchers and wearing heavy armor, they'll only have a small chance at winning in close-quarters combat. On the other hand, a group of guys with a wide range of rifles and armor—a clan in which each member contributes a small part in a planned approach—will have the advantage."

Chest-thumping matters, but the benefits of soldier-tested, Patton-approved battle plans are material, too. According to Kim, "Successful clans control whole city sections back home [in Nostalonia]." Certain buildings become theirs to decorate with emblems and banners, and even neighboring businesses begin offering members-only discounts to their warrior society's celebrated class. More important, your heroism keeps the current flowing in *Huxley*'s power-parched cities.

TO WAR!

Look at the power-transfer stations and processing plants—links in an electrically engineered chain crisscrossing the planet's barren ridges—as capture points in *Battlefield 2*. As with the bunkers and mud-brick blocks in Electronic Arts' jack-of-all-trades game, your goal is to seize and secure them, except events at one node here affect the entire network. "Every action in the battlefield alters other areas in real time," Kim says. "For example, let's say we have battle area A and battle area B, where energy from the mines in A supports a nearby base in B. So, if enemies capture A, B then loses power and its defense systems go down."

A case study in convergence—splicing first-person shooting with roleplaying, and Epic's Unreal Engine 3 with Webzen's own networking code—*Huxley* also saves space for mano a mano melees within its world at war. "Four players from each faction can descend into the Lunarite mines and fight for the energy source in the middle of massive engagements," Kim says. "It's *Quake Arena*–like close-quarters combat."

>> "SUCCESSFUL CLANS CONTROL WHOLE CITY SECTIONS BACK HOME." –SANG HUN KIM



TRANSPACIFIC TITAN

Where'd newcomer publisher Webzen get the chops—and cash—to pull off an undertaking as hugely daunting as *Huxley*? Think: Korea's MMO-crazed masses and China's one-thousand-million-man market. The company claims its Asia-only MMO *Mu* has wrangled more than 56 million registered users worldwide. Now $150 million richer, Webzen's eight studios are working on as many new titles, including the North America–bound *Huxley*, *All Points Bulletin*, and *Soul of the Ultimate Nation*.

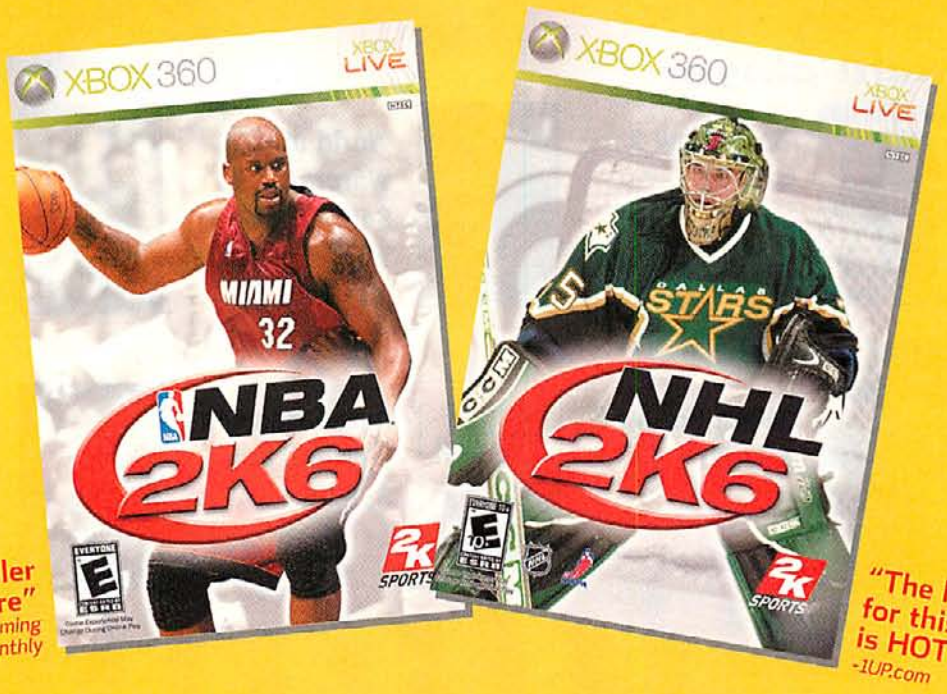


▲ Separate voice-chat channels operate in a chain of command that links clan leaders while letting clan members talk amongst themselves.



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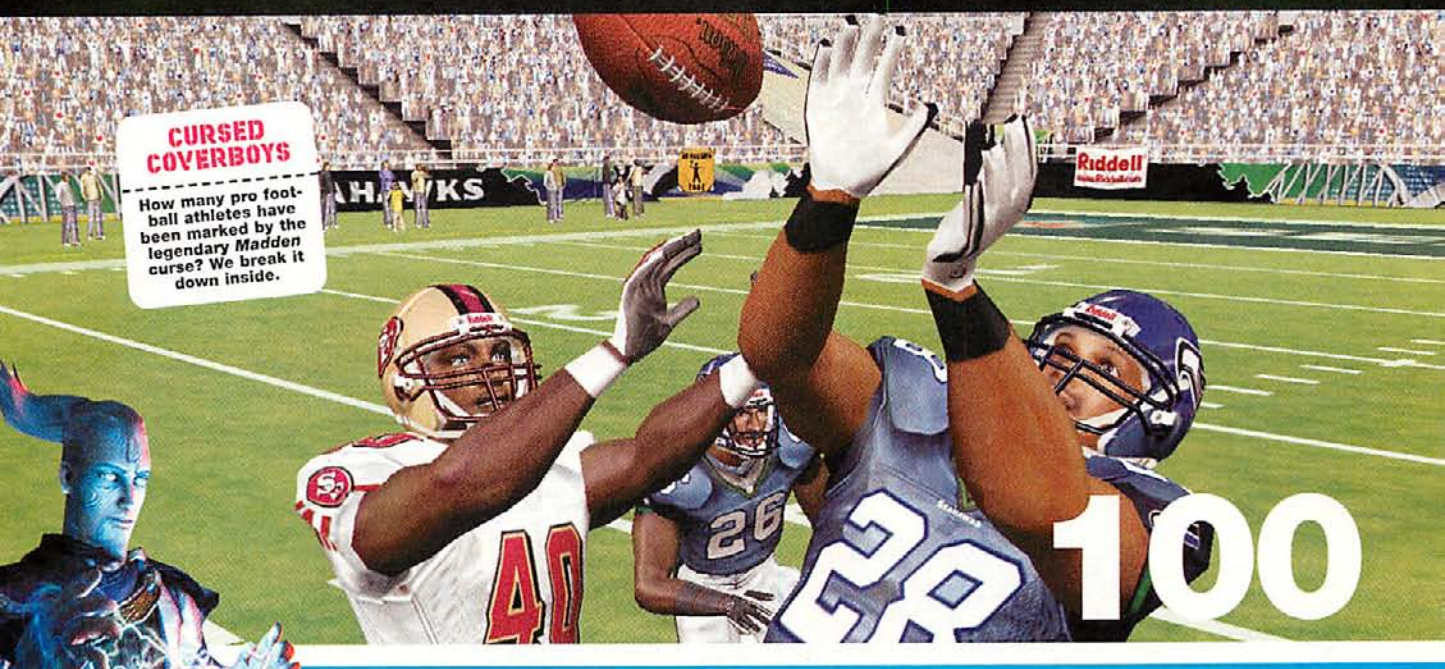
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REVIEWS

OPINIONS YOU CAN TRUST



CHANGE IS GOOD

AS YOU THUMB THROUGH THE REVIEWS SECTION, take note of two changes that debut with this issue. First up is Line of Attack, our new monthly war-gaming column by longtime *CGW* contributor Bruce Geryk. The market for war games is pretty healthy, and there are far, *far* too many of them for us to review in the magazine every issue. If these games are your cup of tea, Line of Attack is the perfect place to get a heads-up on what you should be playing—and looking forward to—each month.

The other big addition is the Next Level page. While we traditionally don't review patches at *CGW*, we do want to keep our readers informed about popular mods in the PC community, as well as crucial patches to online games like *Battlefield 2* and *City of Heroes*. To kick things off, we give you the final word on one of the biggest MMO patches in recent memory: *World of WarCraft: Battlegrounds*. Enjoy these new sections—and if there's a mod or patch that deserves our attention, let us know at cgwletters@ziffdavis.com. >>

REVIEW STANDARDS

We review only final, gold, released-to-retail code, no betas or "near-final, reviewable" builds. We don't review patches, with the exceptions of those for online games like MMOs that autoupdate as a standard part of their operation and those selected for our patch review page. We do this so we are reviewing exactly what you, the consumer, are buying.

All games are rated on a simple five-star scale. One-star games are utter garbage, three-star games should appeal to die-hard fans of the genre, and the rare five-star game is an instant classic. Only the best games—receiving four and a half stars or better—are awarded an Editors' Choice.

INSIDE



Dungeon Siege II
Mommy, when is *Diablo III* coming out?



Advent Rising
Author Orson Scott Card's sci-fi flop.



Fable: The Lost Chapters
Moral: Make your game longer next time.



▲ See what happens when you're a bad guy? You're ugly!

DUNGEON SI

PUBLISHER: Microsoft Game Studios DEVELOPER: Gas Powered Games GENRE: Action-RPG ESRB RATING: M REQUIRED: 1GHZ CPU, 256MB RAM, 4GB hard drive space RECOMMENDED: 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: Internet, LAN (2-4 players)

IF WE RATED GAMES BASED ON EFFORT alone, *Dungeon Siege II* would get a perfect score. In fact, if you made a checklist of or conducted focus-group tests on everything action-RPG fans might want in a game—as Gas Powered Games and its corporate overlords at Microsoft no doubt did—you might come up with a game just like *DS2*. You want tons of monsters to kill? Check. Hordes of phat lewt? Check. An expandable party system, co-op multiplayer, and a branching skill tree? Check, check, and check.

But here's the thing: All the features in the world don't make a game great if they're just tossed in; there needs to be a sense of accomplishment, reward, and forward momentum. *DS2* throws so much stuff at you all the time that, despite the pleasures to be had, it ends up being more exhausting than anything else. This is one game that needs to scale back and let us really *earn* our rewards before handing them to us on a silver platter.

IT'S MY PARTY

DS2 returns us once more to the generic fantasy world of Aranna, where good and evil battle, elves with pointy ears brandish longbows, and princesses wind up missing. In spite of all this, *DS2*'s story is actually much more engaging than that of its predecessor; it starts off in a fairly unconventional way, with you on the wrong side of the law, captured and forced into doing the bidding of the good guys. Over the course of three long acts—each divided into multiple chapters with tons of quests and subquests—the story plays out (with the occasional somber Peter Jackson-esque cut-scene) in a compelling manner, though it's nearly undone by often interminable and poorly written stretches of dialogue, made worse by laughably bad voice-acting.

In any event, you start by creating a character from among four playable races: magic-based dryads and elves, melee-centric half-giants, or generalist humans. You don't explicitly choose a class; you simply *become* a certain class—fighter, ranger, nature mage, or combat mage—by fighting monsters and earning skill points in a particular style. These points are dumped into a branching skill tree that allows you to further customize your character (by adding stun damage or fortified armor to a fighter, for example). There's more freedom here than in most games of this type; you can fight in any way you like and earn skill points in any class, though obviously it's much more effective to concentrate your points in one specific area.

As you explore the world, you meet characters who offer to join your party...just one initially, but up to four during your first playthrough—and by the third time, if you have 150 or so hours to spare, you can recruit up to six characters. As expected, these extra warriors help to fill in any combat specialties you might be lacking in.

The best party member, oddly enough, is your pet—which happens to possess *DS2*'s coolest innovation: He can eat any of the loot you acquire (sort of like a living garbage disposal), and his abilities improve based on what you feed him. Not only is this a good way to spare yourself repeated trips to vendors, but it

AS *DIABLO* TAUGHT US, MUCH FUN CAN BE HAD FROM CLICKING HORDES OF MONSTERS TO DEATH.



▲ My scorpion queen, in back, is virtually indestructible. Yay!



▲ Hi, I'm Lurch! I'm a half-giant knight and I will bash your brains out with this hammer!



▲ My nature mage—the guy in the dress—is always the first to die. Because he's stupid.

EGE II

A bag of carrots and a pile of sticks

also transforms your pet into a near-indestructible monster of a party member. As I explored the wide world of Aranna, I could always count on my pet scorpion to survive any battle, no matter how bad it got.

The gigantic area maps employ the generic basics of the genre (jungles, deserts, snowy mountains, etc.), but still make for fun exploration thanks to the detailed, multilevel terrain and all sorts of secret areas hidden away in the nooks and crannies. Players who enjoy the peculiar pleasure of watching automaps fill in will have much to keep them busy. On the other hand, the interface is boxy and clunky; many in-game windows, like character panels and inventory screens, are small, cluttered, and hard to read. After 40 hours, I still couldn't remember which armor slot was for hands and which was for feet.

TOO MUCH OF NOTHING

But as harsh as it sounds, the real problem with *DS2* is the game itself. As *Diablo* taught us, much fun can be had from clicking hordes of monsters to death and collecting their loot...and during long stretches of *DS2*, I convinced myself that I was having a good time. But when you get right down to it, none of it—neither the combat nor the loot itself—is very compelling.

The monster A.I. is excellent at times, knowing, for example, to target my weak nature mage first. But it was far too easy early on to keep him alive and constantly autocasting group heals on my party, so there was rarely a threat of death...and when it did come, conventional genre annoyances like corpse runs and monster respawns were all present and accounted for. As the hours accumulated, the entire game began to feel a bit like mowing the lawn. That is to say, a chore.

Worse, *DS2*'s monsters rarely drop anything of interest. When every other item is "rare" or "exceptional," it's hard to believe that they are either. Barely halfway through the game, I had so much money and so much good armor that I just stopped picking stuff up—frankly, there's just too much of everything and not enough that stands out. It's the game's fundamental flaw; I don't need to collect 400 pieces of armor if only three of them are ever going to be any good, I don't need 50 spells in my spell book if I'm never going to use anything but the very first two I selected, and I don't need to kill 8,000 monsters if only 10 of them total are actually going to present me with any kind of challenge.

The best games of this genre—like, yes, *Diablo*—entice players with a steady carrot-and-stick mechanic, constantly dangling something cool in front of our noses. *Dungeon Siege II* errs by giving you way too much, all the time...ultimately diminishing the impact of everything you do. I don't want or need a whole bag of carrots. I just want *one*./ Jeff Green

LET'S PARTY!

With action-RPGs, multiplayer can often be more rewarding than the single-player experience—and it's not bad at all in *Dungeon Siege II*. Up to four people can play cooperatively over a LAN or the Internet, using their single-player characters. In couples mode, three players can each bring an additional party member or pet in from their single-player games, while in party mode, each player can import two party members or pets apiece. When the single-player game starts wearing you down, try this instead—it will boost your enjoyment a great deal.

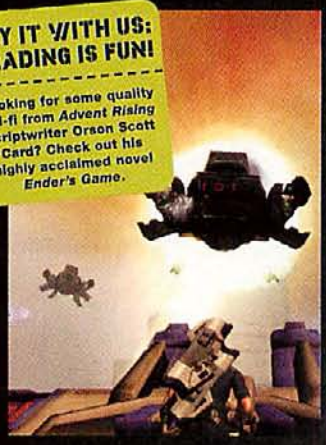
It's still not *Diablo*.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★½☆

SAY IT WITH US: READING IS FUN!

Looking for some quality sci-fi from *Advent Rising* scriptwriter Orson Scott Card? Check out his highly acclaimed novel *Ender's Game*.







What exactly is this guy doing standing in the middle of the air? Yay for random graphical bugs!





ADVENT RISING

Not quite the second coming

PUBLISHER: **Majesco** DEVELOPER: **GlyphX Games** GENRE: **Action** ESRB RATING: **T** REQUIRED: **Pentium III or AMD Athlon 2.0GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 5.5GB hard drive space, 128MB videocard** RECOMMENDED: **Pentium 4 or AMD Athlon 3.4GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 256MB videocard, gamepad** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

AFTER SEEING "EPIC SCI-FI ACTION" BOLDLY proclaimed on *Advent Rising*'s box, some of you are probably expecting something akin to *War of the Worlds: The Game* inside—and if so, prepare for disappointment. The lofty aspirations in this cinematic experience are plain to see, as *Advent* features eight superpowers, lots of guns, and a serious God complex. But for all the ambition and good intentions, the game is plagued with overly complex controls and a few irritating bugs. Could someone please double-check the definition of "epic"?

PLAYING THE "ORSON SCOTT" CARD

Any game that claims epic status needs a sweeping, original story line, which we (sort of) get in *Advent*, courtesy of noted science-fiction author Orson Scott Card. Here, you play as ace pilot Gideon Wyeth, one of the last surviving humans in the universe. Like Luke Skywalker and other Jedi who discover the powers of the Force in the *Star Wars* universe, it seems that the humans of *Advent*'s future possess the potential for some serious *Matrix*-caliber techniques. They just need a little push—for example, the total destruction of their home planet.

As you guide Gideon around the post-Earth universe, you are faced with periodic "choose your fate" moments (do you save your brother or your fiancée?). You never really have to sweat the consequences, though, as all paths seem to lead to the same inevitable conclusion. The narrative isn't all it's cracked up to be; in-game dialogue is minimal, and Card largely fails to take into account the fact that this is an interactive medium. Every few minutes, some tense event triggers yet another mini cut-scene, revealing some tiny morsel of Gideon's personality. Would it have killed developer GlyphX Games to make a few of these cut-scenes interactive?

EXTRA DIGITS REQUIRED

When you finally stop watching and start playing, a whole lot of power is placed at your fingertips, as weapons and superpowers improve with use. The problem is that you need about two extra fingers to juggle all the keys required to play. Even with a USB gamepad, you can't map out all the functions...not that we're complaining, as we usually prefer keyboards and mice. But here, you're madly stretching fingers in order to freeze time, levitate objects, dodge, shoot, and manage the unwieldy "flick targeting" cursor—which you control with the mouse wheel. Switching between targets shifts the camera, and it's also the only way to focus your superpowers on some objects. What was a handy targeting mechanic for the console version of *Advent* is now a serious detriment for PC gamers. There are times when we fought with the camera controls just to lift a rock and lob it at some alien's noggin.

Fortunately, the technical issues don't go much further than that. The PC version of *Advent* isn't saddled with the same number of bugs and performance issues present in the Xbox game, though we still encountered a fair share of quirky moments—from aliens standing in midair to characters walking up through the ground—but no true game stoppers surfaced. Ultimately, *Advent Rising* shoots for the stars but barely breaks orbit. / **Darren Gladstone**

WILL ADVENT KEEP RISING?

Developer GlyphX Games envisions a three-game story line that's already been mapped out. The next game in the trilogy picks up where *Advent* leaves off, giving you control of a highly evolved Gideon right from the start. But will it ever...well, rise? No word yet—but a PSP spin-off, *Advent Shadow*, ships next February and follows the adventures of a human mercenary named Marin Steel.

Fun when it's not busy being a pain in the ass.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

VERDICT ★★★☆☆

> CARD LARGELY FAILS TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE FACT THAT THIS IS AN INTERACTIVE MEDIUM.

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TAKE COMMAND!





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TEEN T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Violence

DOLBY PRO LOGIC II

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▲ Even when you're surrounded, the block stance is near impenetrable.



▲ Wanton violence incurs a heavy fine—or a prolonged fight with the local guards.

FABLE: THE LOST

Quest for glory

PUBLISHER: **Microsoft** DEVELOPER: **Lionhead Studios** GENRE: **Action-RTS** ESRB RATING: **M** REQUIRED: **1.4GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 3GB HARD DRIVE SPACE** RECOMMENDED: **2.5GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard** MULTIPLAYER: **None**

EVERY FABLE HAS A MORAL—OR SO WE'VE been told. *Fable: The Lost Chapters*, spun from the mad game-design genius of Lionhead Studios head honcho Peter Molyneux, is a different kind of story...one that doesn't always know what it wants to be but sometimes manages to be a fun little tale in spite of itself.

Fable's story is simple: You're an orphaned youth in search of your long-lost sister—who was abducted from your ransacked hometown by nefarious forces right before your very eyes. After years of rigorous martial training at the local Heroes' Guild, you set out to explore the world, find your kidnapped sister, and earn a bit of fortune and glory in the process. Generic Fantasy Plot No. 237 strikes again!

SO YOU WANT TO BE A HERO?

Though the Heroes' Guild has what is possibly the most uninspired name ever, it serves a functional purpose, acting as a central hub area for your quest. New missions are acquired here, and when it's time to rest up or spend your hard-earned experience points, you can return to the guild from almost any location thanks to handy teleport pads scattered throughout the world of Albion. During missions, a minimap points you toward your next objective, so you're rarely left wandering around without knowing where to go next.

But this also tends to make you feel a bit railroaded through the game. Missions follow fairly linear paths and usually involve simple tasks along the lines of killing a certain enemy or escorting an NPC to a distant location. These errands are rarely difficult and tend to go by quickly, making for a short main story that most players can probably coast through in a single weekend, assuming most side areas are ignored. The twitch-based combat is the only tricky part, and the sheer number of bandits, undead, and other typical fantasy fare can be overwhelming...that is, until you discover the magic trick to staying alive: the Block button.

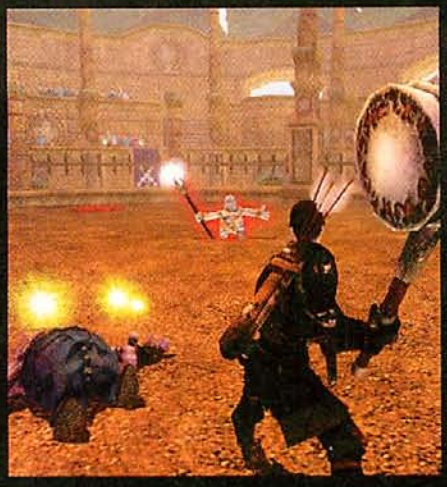
WAGES OF WAR

Fable's action-RPG combat system is an awkward clickfest. Lock-on targeting features a poorly implemented camera, and the keyboard controls don't lend themselves to the precise movements you'll often wish you could make. The Block key inadvertently makes up for these fallacies, as it makes you completely impenetrable to most common threats during the early to mid areas of the game—no matter how swamped you are or what direction you happen to be facing.

> *FABLE* ULTIMATELY ENDS UP OFFERING A MORAL CHOICE SYSTEM WITH NO REAL CONSEQUENCES.



▲ Have fun trying to use your keyboard for combat.





▲ Master snipers can score some clean one-shot kills.



▲ Plenty of room-clearing magic spells bring the game's difficulty way down.

CHAPTERS

LOST AND FOUND

Fable: The Lost Chapters expands upon the content in the original Xbox release of *Fable* in 2004. Those who have already played that version will find the same sort of gameplay and core story line here. The major differences lie with the optional content; *The Lost Chapters* includes more side missions (many of which feature new areas) and a few additional monsters. You also enjoy the benefit of more magic spells and additional equipment options. Just don't expect a radically different gameplay experience with this expansion.

Once you realize this, most battles boil down to near-constant blocking and carefully trading blows using either a charged-up melee attack or a barrage of powerful magic spells, depending on which path your character takes.

Character development comes with a wide degree of freedom; the experience points you earn are spent toward improving three distinct disciplines, which essentially translate into fighter, magic user, and thief archetypes. Some attributes (such as health and damage resistance), are necessary no matter what type of hero you're building, but you can generally shape your character any way you see fit. The system works well, but the big downside is that it doesn't actually impact the story; you still get the same foes, the same quests, and even the same handful of hackneyed stealth areas (thief or not). *Fable's* freedoms are something of an illusion, and the game's strange ethical alignment mechanics make this even more apparent.

SHADOWS OF DARKNESS

The "good or evil" question has been posed to players in Western-developed RPGs dating back to the early days of *Ultima*. *Fable* tries to do the same, but it ultimately ends up offering a moral choice system with no lasting implications, save for multiple endings and a few late-game scenarios. Certain missions present good and evil variants (defend the village or join in the bandits' raid), and you have the option of attacking and killing most random NPCs or vandalizing peaceful cities, but the worst typical consequences are a few guard fights and the occasional NPC who runs in fear from you. Your actions impact your appearance a great deal (as does your choice of equipment), but beyond that, this entire mechanic seems inconsistent and underdeveloped. Sometimes, you can wade into a group of characters and kill one off with no visible fear from onlookers—certainly not the reaction you'd expect.

The ethical trappings are only part of a larger issue, though. A lot of *Fable's* additional content—including houses for sale, marriages to pursue, and lots of table games to wager on—is never really the focus of your actions. It's easy to glaze over a lot of it without even really noticing the additional depth, which results in much of the material feeling somewhat hollow and tacked on. It's a shame that much of this charm is so peripheral, as the game boasts some nice production values and a fairly solid set of mechanics (once you acclimate to the combat, that is). Then again, it comes from the mind of a designer known for overambitious, incomplete ideas. What's the moral of *Fable*? We aren't really sure. / Ryan Scott

Fun and ambitious, but not nearly as substantial as it wants you to think it is.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★½☆

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CODENAME: PANZERS, PHASE TWO

Tank rush!

PUBLISHER: CDV Software DEVELOPER: Stormregion GENRE: RTS ESRB RATING: T REQUIRED: Pentium III or Athlon 1.0GHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 3.5GB hard drive space, DVD-ROM drive RECOMMENDED: Pentium 4 or Athlon 1.8GHz CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB videocard MULTIPLAYER: Internet, LAN (2-6 players)

DEVELOPER STORMREGION TRIES TO add a human element to its *Codename: Panzers* sequel through in-character mission intros and cinematic sequences; unfortunately, the story lines wind up feeling like contrived distractions from the game's action. Jarringly bad voice acting doesn't help matters, but the cut-scenes have a pleasing old-fashioned newsreel feel to them. In short, the presentation is a mixed bag—as is the gameplay.

The single-player campaigns focus on obscure battles of WWII, including the Italian army's struggle for North Africa, the Allied invasion of Italy, and the partisans fighting to oust the Germans from Yugoslavia. These missions feature a variety of objectives, making the game feel less mundane than the usual wartime fare.



ARMY MEN

Instead of traditional resource management, *Panzers* employs a *Panzer Generals*–style "prestige" system. Completing objectives earns you points, which are used to buy units for the next mission, thus forming a customized core that you keep throughout the campaigns. Your troops earn experience points in battle, and their armaments can be upgraded. This makes the first several missions quite engaging, but the gameplay soon flounders as you realize how useless your infantry units are: The weakest tanks pulverize them within seconds, and the barren maps offer few fortifications to hide in.

As a result, you'll find your armies composed entirely of tanks and support vehicles, making most of *Panzers*' army management superfluous. Then again, this helps you outlast the monstrously huge CPU-controlled armies through simple attrition. The brain-dead A.I. fails to respond to threats beyond its immediate line of sight, so disparate elements of the enemy army will never back each other up. Some missions encourage alternative solutions through clever tactics, but the optimal strategy is usually slow, grinding, and repetitive.

Panzers' multiplayer is also frustrating. It seems like an afterthought, with few maps and only two game modes: a vanilla deathmatch and a "domination" mode in which opposing sides vie for control of sites that produce reinforcements. Due to the feeble infantry, these skirmishes end up just being boring duels of armor and artillery. As in much of this game, the execution is uneven, leaving the audience with a big ball of unfulfilled potential. **/ Di Luo** *(from 1UP.com)*

Somewhat repetitive, but never so bad that it's offensive.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★☆☆



▲ It won't take you long to realize that tanks are the way to go...



▲ ...since the use of foot soldiers in *Panzers* is pretty much a death wish.

LINE OF ATTACK

Bonjour, Grognards!

Your monthly guide to hardcore war-gaming

RIGHT NOW, THE BIGGEST NEWS FOR war gamers is the release of *Down in Flames*. Dan Verssen's outstanding board game comes to the PC courtesy of Battlefront.com (publisher of the *Combat Mission* series), complete with online play to supplement the campaign mode. This elegant, stylized game of air combat is playable in 15 to 20 minute sessions, and it's a tense nail-biter all the way. Look for the full review next issue...and if you want to check out a demo that includes one playable campaign and a four-player Internet mode, point your browser to www.downinflamesonline.com.



WINSPMBT

PUBLISHER: Shrapnel Games DEVELOPER: Shrapnel Games GENRE: Tank Simulator ESRB RATING: NR

The *Steel Panthers* series has been around for years, and *Steel Panthers II: Modern Battles* remains the definitive modern tactical-level war game. *Steel Panthers: Main Battle Tank* (or *SPMBT* for short) started as a mod that added many improvements to that game but ran only on clunky MS-DOS systems. Shrapnel Games has fixed the problem with *WinSPMBT*, a fully Windows XP–compatible version of *Main Battle Tank*. It may be a port of a 9-year-old title, but it's still a respectable game—even with such obvious signs of old age. Fortunately, you can download it for free from www.shrapnelgames.com or purchase a special "enhanced CD version" that enables resolutions above 800x600...for the unbelievable price of $39.95. My advice: Just stick with the download. **/ Bruce Geryk** *(For more war-gaming geekery, visit Bruce at grognards.1UP.com.)*

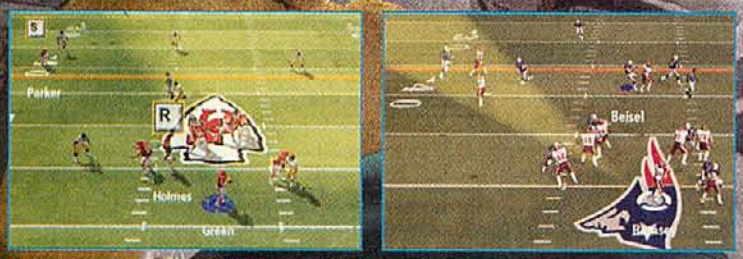
Old-school war-gaming in every sense of the word.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★☆☆



MADDEN NFL 06

Play it the way Randy Moss would



▲ Compare and contrast the cones of vision—not all quarterbacks are created equal.

PUBLISHER: **Electronic Arts** DEVELOPER: **EA Sports** GENRE: **Sports** ESRB RATING: **E** REQUIRED: **Pentium III or AMD Athlon 800MHz CPU, 256MB RAM, 2GB hard drive space** RECOMMENDED: **Broadband Internet connection, gamepad** MULTIPLAYER: **Internet, LAN (2 players)**

WITH EVERY OTHER PC FOOTBALL SERIES dead and gone (anyone remember *Front Page Sports: Football*?) *Madden NFL* is not just the reigning king of PC football—it's the only option PC gamers have. But no matter how much the EA "haterade" seems to flow (especially following the publisher's exclusive licensing agreement with the NFL), it's hard to find fault with the *Madden* games. Unsurprisingly, *Madden 06* is another deep, engrossing football simulator...with some extra features and a semi-irritating learning curve.

One bit of standard *Madden* gameplay still applies: You definitely want to use a gamepad. During those last-second plays, the wonky keyboard controls make it too easy to accidentally send a player diving for the goal line that's 20 yards away when you actually intended to hustle through that newly opened hole and make the opposing team eat dust.

KICKIN' IT

Gamepad or not, the new kicking system causes some headaches. The precision-based kicking interface is easy to understand but amazingly difficult to time properly. In previous *Madden* titles, you could always count on that extra point after a touchdown, even during your worst games...but not in *Madden 06*, where you inevitably end up missing those supposed gimmes time and time again. Fortunately, skilled players can recoup some of these lost points with the series' newest gameplay feature: quarterback vision control.

Quarterback vision (which, contrary to its name, does not impart a first-person perspective) provides a semiauthentic interpretation of life as a quarterback. Each quarterback possesses a unique visual radius, which varies depending on how talented he is. For example, the Patriots' Tom Brady has a very wide range of vision that encompasses numerous receivers, whereas many, erm...*lesser* quarterbacks have extremely limited throw areas to work with. This definitely takes some getting used to; the frustration mounts when you see an open receiver to your left, yet your right-facing quarterback is unable to toss the ball to him without penalty for passing outside of his visual area. This unique form of tunnel vision eventually grows on you, though; by keeping your throws within the passing cone, you steadily learn how to improve your passing game with smarter and better plays—which is ultimately a good thing.

FRANCHISE PLAYER

Once you get past the vision control quirks, *Madden 06* is essentially the same in-depth game that *Madden 2005* is, but with better offensive A.I. and more key commands. You can still take a winning team to the Super Bowl in franchise mode, customize your own player in create-a-player mode, and even follow your custom player through an entire career in superstar mode, which plays like a sort of weird amalgamation of the two. And—most important—it's still easy to smack down your buddies over the Internet. Armchair quarterbacks should appreciate the new options, and longtime fans are treated to more of the same kick-ass gameplay that has made *Madden* the unstoppable juggernaut it is today. / Sean DallasKidd

THE MADDEN CURSE

Several athletes have sustained injuries or performed poorly on the field following their *Madden* box cover stints. Is the *Madden* curse just an urban legend, or is there some serious black magic going on? Here are the hard facts:

EDDIE GEORGE, TENNESSEE TITANS (2001): His game went south one season after he showed up on the box.

DAUNTE CULPEPPER, MINNESOTA VIKINGS (2002): Culpepper's team choked hard in 200...despite being preseason Super Bowl favorites.

MARSHALL FAULK, ST. LOUIS RAMS (2003): Faulk was sidelined for most of the 2002 season thanks to numerous injuries.

MICHAEL VICK, ATLANTA FALCONS (2004): He played a mere five games during the 2003 season after breaking his right leg during the first quarter of an exhibition game.

RAY LEWIS, BALTIMORE RAVENS (2005): The first defensive player to grace the box—and the first to come away unscathed.

DONOVAN MCNABB, PHILADELPHIA EAGLES (2006): Time will tell!

Another incremental step, but still a great game of football.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★★☆



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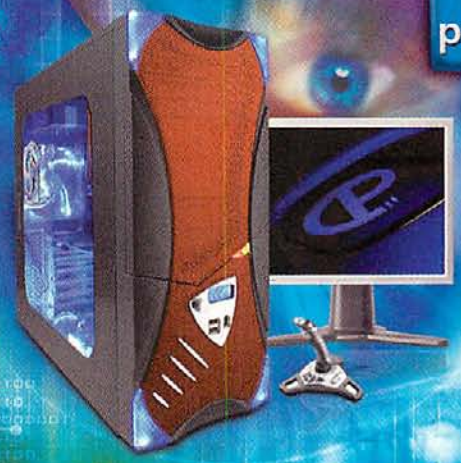
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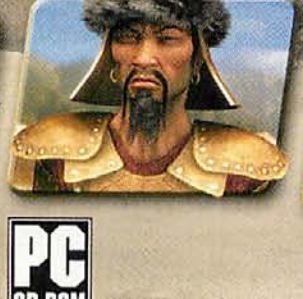
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- **OVERHAULED INTERFACE:** RTS style, intuitive interface allows you to manipulate units and cities with greater control and faster speed.
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- **NEW FEATURES:** Introducing religion, Holy Cities, missionaries, Great People, variable scale games and loads of new civic options: Imagine a communist regime with freedom of the press – or a republic without it.
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CIVILIZATION IV
NOVEMBER 2005

"It has our dictator glands pumping conquer-juice into our bloodstream by the gallon."
– GAME INFORMER

1468 1894 1930 1945



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www.CivIV.com

2K GAMES

REWIND

What should you play today? Names in blue indicate Editors' Choice games

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Act of War: Direct Action	Jun 05	★★★★☆
Aerial Strike	Jun 05	★★½☆☆
Alexander	Mar 05	★★☆☆☆
Area 51	Sep 05	★★★☆☆
Armies of Exigo	Mar 05	★★★★☆
The Bard's Tale	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Baseball Mogul 2006	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½☆
Battlefield 2	Sep 05	★★★★★
BloodRayne 2	Oct 05	★★★☆☆
Brothers in Arms: Road to Hill 30	Jun 05	★★★★½
Close Combat: First to Fight	Jul/Aug 05	★★☆☆☆
The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape From Butcher Bay—Developer's Cut	Mar 05	★★★★★
Combat: Task Force 121	Jul/Aug 05	★½☆☆☆
Cossacks II: Napoleonic Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★½☆☆
Crown of Glory: Europe in the Age of Napoleon	Oct 05	★★½☆☆
Dangerous Waters	Jun 05	★★★★☆
Domination	Jun 05	★★★½☆
Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Dragoon	Apr 05	★★☆☆☆
DRIV3R	Jul/Aug 05	★★☆☆☆
Dungeon Lords	Sep 05	☆☆☆☆☆
Elite Warriors: Vietnam	Jul/Aug 05	★½☆☆☆
Empire Earth II	Jun 05	★★★★☆
ER	Oct 05	★★☆☆☆
Fantastic 4	Sep 05	★★½☆☆
Fate	Sep 05	★★★★☆
FlatOut	Sep 05	★★★★☆
Forgotten Realms: Demon Stone	Apr 05	★★★☆☆
Freedom Force vs. The 3rd Reich	May 05	★★★★★
Gary Grigsby's World at War	Jun 05	★★★½☆
Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas	Sep 05	★★★★½



▲ The Bard's Tale

GAME	ISSUE	RATING
GTR FIA Racing	Oct 05	★★★★☆
Guild Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★½
Half-Life 2	Feb 05	★★★★½
Hearts of Iron II	Apr 05	★★½☆☆
Heritage of Kings: The Settlers	Jun 05	★½☆☆☆
Imperial Glory	Sep 05	★★½☆☆
Joint Ops: Escalation	Feb 05	★★★★☆
Knights of Honor	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Legacy: Dark Shadows	Apr 05	★½☆☆☆
Lego Star Wars	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½☆
The Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle-earth	Feb 05	★★★★☆
Lost Admiral Returns	May 05	★★★½☆
The Matrix Online	Jul/Aug 05	★★★☆☆
Medieval Lords	Apr 05	★★½☆☆
MVP Baseball 2005	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★☆
NASCAR SimRacing	May 05	★★★★☆
NBA Live 2005	Mar 05	★★★½☆
Need for Speed Underground 2	Apr 05	★★★★½
NHL Eastside Hockey Manager	Mar 05	★★★★☆
Obscure	Jul/Aug 05	★★½☆☆
Painkiller: Battle out of Hell	Feb 05	★★★½☆
Pariah	Sep 05	★★½☆☆
Playboy: The Mansion	Apr 05	★½☆☆☆
Prince of Persia: Warrior Within	Mar 05	★★★★☆
Project: Snowblind	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½☆
Psychonauts	Jun 05	★★★★½
Psychotoxic	Jul/Aug 05	★½☆☆☆
Raging Tiger	Apr 05	★★☆☆☆
Restricted Area	Oct 05	★½☆☆☆
Return to Mysterious Island	Apr 05	★★★★☆
RYL: Path of the Emperor	Oct 05	★½☆☆☆
Second Sight	Jul/Aug 05	★★★½☆
Sentinel: Descendants in Time	Apr 05	★★★☆☆
Sid Meier's Pirates!	Feb 05	★★★★½



▲ Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas

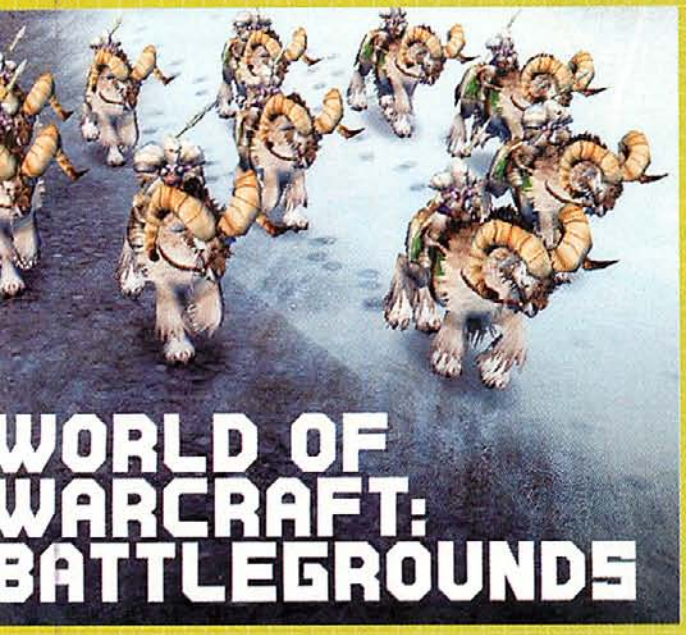
GAME	ISSUE	RATING
Silent Hunter III	Jun 05	★★★★★
The Sims 2: University	May 05	★★★★☆
Space Interceptor: Project Freedom	Feb 05	★★★☆☆
Splinter Cell Chaos Theory	Jun 05	★★★★★
The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie	Feb 05	★★½☆☆
Star Wars KOTOR II: The Sith Lords	Apr 05	★★★★½
Star Wars Republic Commando	May 05	★★★★☆
Stronghold 2	Sep 05	★★☆☆☆
SuperPower 2	Feb 05	★½☆☆☆
Supremacy	Jul/Aug 05	★★☆☆☆
SWAT 4	Jun 05	★★★★★
T-72: Balkans on Fire!	Oct 05	★★★½☆
Time of Defiance	Apr 05	★★★☆☆
Tin Soldiers: Alexander the Great	Apr 05	★★★½☆
Tin Soldiers: Julius Caesar	Sep 05	★★★½☆
TrackMania Sunrise	Sep 05	★★★★☆
Ultima Online: Samurai Empire	Feb 05	★★☆☆☆
Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines	Feb 05	★★★★☆
Vendetta Online	May 05	★½☆☆☆
World Championship Tennis	Jul/Aug 05	★☆☆☆☆
World Soccer Winning Eleven 8 International	Jul/Aug 05	★★★★☆
Zoo Tycoon 2	Feb 05	★★½☆☆



▲ SWAT 4

THE NEXT LEVEL

CGW's guide to the latest must-have patches and user mods



WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BATTLEGROUNDS

PUBLISHER: **Blizzard Entertainment** DEVELOPER: **Blizzard Entertainment**
WEBSITE: **www.worldofwarcraft.com**

THE LONG-AWAITED *WORLD OF WARCRAFT: BATTLEGROUNDS* PATCH (which went live this past June) has a detonating impact on player-versus-player gameplay in Blizzard's popular MMORPG. The average player can now participate in PVP action without being exposed to the ruthless and unnecessary ganking that plagues PVP-specific servers; indeed, the horseplay on those servers seems to have calmed down as more players turn to *Battlegrounds* as a means to relieve their scalding aggression.

Each of *Battlegrounds*' two areas features a distinct type of PVP gameplay: Warsong Gulch (for levels 21 and up) is a 10-on-10, too-fast-too-furious capture-the-flag arena; and Alterac Valley (levels 51 plus) features a day-long, *Battlefield*-esque, 40-man team battleground. The next patch (which wasn't quite ready when we went to press) will introduce the Arathi Basin, which sits snugly between the current two options. In short, there's something here to get your competitive blood boiling, no matter what level you are. The competition in both battlegrounds is much more restrained than that in standard PVP, and players earn honor points for using clever strategy instead of going on haphazard killing sprees. You earn some pretty sweet equipment (purchased at a special shop) for attaining a high PVP rank, and nothing really compares to being on a winning Warsong Gulch team.

But the scoring system's bell curve means high-end PVP ranks and reward gear aren't available to the casual player...or anyone who is unable to pour 20 hours a day into matching each server's score leaders. "Casual" level 60 players should resign themselves to having subpar PVP gear until the current high rankers fall off, and players below level 60 should keep leveling, as honor point awards are drastically reduced at lower levels. As always, die-hard players have an easier road to the top—but despite this disparity in the rewards system, the core gameplay in *Battlegrounds* is enough to offer an adrenaline rush that's both satisfying and dangerously addictive. They don't call it "WarCrack" for nothing. / Karen Chu

A wonderful cure for your massively multiplayer PVP itch.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★★☆



"My daddy loves his *Civ* more than he loves me."

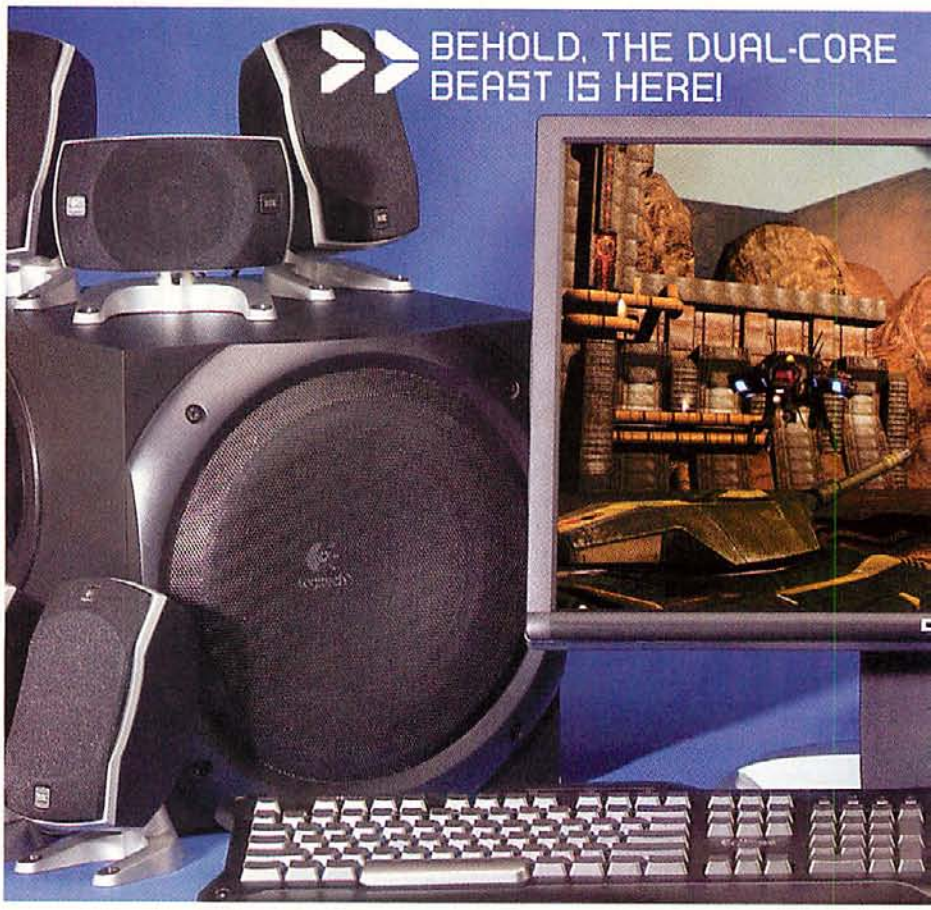
Don't let this happen to you. CivAnon can help.

www.CivAnon.org

The end of Civilization begins here.



A NEW AGE IS DAWNING. DUAL-CORE processing means taking your PC designs in new directions, so this month we've created a brand-new Killer Rig built from the ground up for skin-blistering speed. The Temjin X2 SLI DIY system is no joke. Inside Silverstone's magnificently sturdy and thermally sound Temjin TJ06 full-tower chassis, we've installed AMD's flagship Athlon 64 X2 4800+ 2.4GHz dual-core processor, which sits pretty in Nvidia's NForce4 SLI configuration.



EYE OF THE STORM

Now, when attempting to build a superfast machine, the first rule of thumb is to focus on the CPU, since the processor is the core foundation of a machine's performance and endurance. Once the CPU's in place, you build outward from there with the best components possible. Frankly, we've been waiting to build this machine ever since AMD announced its rocket-fast dual-core processor line—plugging its phenomenal Athlon 64 X2 4800+ 2.4GHz dual-core CPU with retail heat sink and fan into our Killer Rig was a dream come true. Yeah, dual-core multithreaded gaming is still basically patiently waiting for developers to catch up and really take advantage of the technology, but even with the current dearth of optimized dual-core games, this processor rocks single-threaded instruction sets. Best of all, it begs for overclocking. Thank you, AMD, for bridging the gap between performance, reliability, and tweakability in your products.

But no system can dominate without a stable motherboard, which here is the Asus A8N-SLI Premium. It's a good upgrade from Asus' world-class Deluxe model, made more extraordinary thanks to its abilities to handle AMD dual-core processors and feature true PCI Express x16 graphics (non-SLI) support, more PCI Express slots with wider PCI Express placement on the board, and SATA II support for faster bandwidth speeds. But most important, Asus upgraded its NF4 SLI Northbridge cooling solution with an innovative copper heatpipe design.

MOTHER OF ALL MOTHERBOARDS

This motherboard carries the standard array of dual RAID, dual Gigabit LAN, 10 USB 2.0 ports, and dual-channel DDR RAM support in an awesome motherboard design, with the only blemish being the disappointing lack of IEEE 1394b 800Mbps FireWire support. As for audio, the A8N-SLI Premium sports Realtek's built-in ALC850 audio chip with support for 7.1 surround

The Guts

	COMPONENT	PRICE
Processor	AMD Athlon 64 X2 4800+ 2.4GHz processor with heat sink and fan	$1,100
Case	Silverstone Temjin SST-TJ06B aluminum alloy full-tower case with side window panel	$145
Power Supply	Silverstone Zeus power supply	$175
Motherboard	Asus A8N-SLI Premium NForce4 PCI Express motherboard with 7.1 audio, dual Gigabit LAN, and dual RAID	$170
Memory	Corsair XMS Xpert TwinXP1024-3200XL PC3200 DDR400 2 x 512MB (1GB total) memory kit with microcontroller LED screen	$270
Memory 2	Corsair XMS TwinXP1024-3200XL PC3200 DDR400 2 x 512MB memory kit (1GB total)	$240
Hard Drives	Two Western Digital Raptor 74GB 10,000 rpm SATA HDDs (2 x $170)	$340
Graphics Processor	Two EVGA Nvidia e-GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express GPUs (2 x $549)	$1,098
DVD-ROM Drive	Mad Dog MegaSTOR 6-in-1 dual-layer DVD±R±RW	$70
CD-RW Drive	LG CD±RW optical drive	$29
Floppy Drive	Sony 1.44MB floppy drive	$19
Monitor	Dell 2405FPW 24-inch LCD	$1,019
Keyboard	Saitek Eclipse Keyboard	$59
Mouse	Razer Diamondback	$45
Speakers	Logitech Z-5500 Digital 5.1 speaker system	$249
Operating System	Microsoft Windows XP Professional x64 Edition	$149
Misc.	Mod lighting and fans from www.xoxide.com	$35
TOTAL COST		$5,212

KILLER RIG

CGW's latest and greatest PC creation: Temjin X2 SLI, a natural born killer



Tech Commando
This month:
Raphael rebuilt his kitchen, and it's given him a whole new perspective on having the right tools for a job.

PRICE $5,212



sound in Dolby Digital. Though we often prefer diverting audio processing power from the CPU and mobo for the best possible low-latency loads for gaming and improved audio sampling and resolution, we skipped installing a dedicated soundcard for now. Why? We're holding a berth for Creative's new kick-ass soundcard, the Sound Blaster X-Fi.

Next up is the chassis, and what a beauty the Temjin TJ06 full-tower case from Silverstone is. The thermal characteristics make this a choice pick for handling the intense heat of overclocking. We opted for Silverstone's Zeus 650-watt SLI-compliant power supply since it is one of the few chosen power supplies to receive Nvidia's SLI stamp of approval. This setup was fleshed out with mod lighting and four lighted 120mm and 80mm chassis fans, and the noise was still kept below 50 decibels thanks to the case's great insulation.

We then filled out the system with a group of A-list components to give us that crucial edge: one full gig of Corsair XMS Xpert TwinXP1024-3200XL PC3200 RAM and another gig of XMS TwinXP1024-3200XL PC3200 DDR400. Then, we tacked on two Western Digital Raptor 74GB 10,000 rpm SATA hard drives in a RAID 0 (striped) configuration. The PCI Express slots are locked and loaded with two fast EVGA e-GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB GPUs. Final touches include a dual-layer DVD burner from Mad Dog, a CD+/-RW from LG, and a standard Sony 1.44MB floppy drive, all with mod cabling from www.xoxide.com. For style, we matched the black Temjin case to Saitek's dark Eclipse keyboard with backlighting and my favorite optical mouse, Razer's high-performance Diamondback. Want the perfect AV experience? Deck out the rig with Dell's awesome 24-inch LCD monitor and the Logitech Z-5500 Digital 5.1 speaker system, the best PC speakers on the market for cranking pure Dolby surround sound.

With Windows XP Pro with SP2 loaded, a RAID striping array installed, and updated drivers, it's time to tweak the CPU frequency and voltage settings using the Asus utilities. The videocard was overclocked using Nvidia's nTune utility. This cranks! It's yielding some of the most impressive *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*, *Far Cry*, and *Doom 3* scores to date.

The Temjin X2 SLI Killer Rig is a keeper. In addition to containing the perfect selection of A-list components and hardware to give us our performance edge, its mod lighting and killer chassis make it a looker, too. If only every system were this visually appealing—but just didn't cost as much. / **Raphael Liberatore**

INSIDE



108 REVIEW

GeForce 7800 GTX Races
Five Nvidia cards break our speedometers.



112 REVIEW

Battle Boards
Three Intel motherboards square off.

Making Sense of 3D GameGauge Lite

Each system goes through an exhaustive series of benchmark tests in order to assess overall performance and raw speed values. Benchmarking consists of both the industry's undisputed reference synthetic benchmark utility, 3DMark05, along with *CGW*'s own real-world game benchmarking suite, 3D GameGauge Lite. 3DGG Lite consists of a brilliant collection of A-list action games like *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*, *Doom 3*, *Unreal Tournament 2004*, *Far Cry*, and *Painkiller*. 3DGG Lite video configurations are set at 1280x1024 resolution with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled, except for *Halo*, which gets no benefit from either technique. Results are then tabulated and posted as a raw geomean score for your reference.

3D GameGauge Lite



HOW OUR GRAPH WORKS We graph a product's benchmark scores to demonstrate how it compares to the scores of other products we've reviewed in the last six months. During that time, the lowest 3D GameGauge Lite score we've seen is 40; as of now, the highest is 111.7.

1UP.com PRICE INDEX **Prices for products not purchased directly from manufacturers were the lowest we found by shopping on 1UP.com.**

STOP DROOLING!
If you're saddled with an older PC, it probably can't support these SLI boards. In that case, try Chaintech's fast SE6600G GeForce 6600 GT 128MB DDR3 PCI Express videocard. At $240, or $480 for two cards in SLI, it's a solid solution that won't break the bank.

NVIDIA GEFORCE

In which *CGW* determines if all 7800 GTX SLI boards are created equal

WE SHOVED FIVE TOP-RATED GEFORCE 7800 GTX VIDEOCARDS, ALL TWEAKED AND ready to jump off the starting line, into the ultrafast CyberPower Gamer Ultra XLC. We had one goal: to see if any one of them outperformed the others.

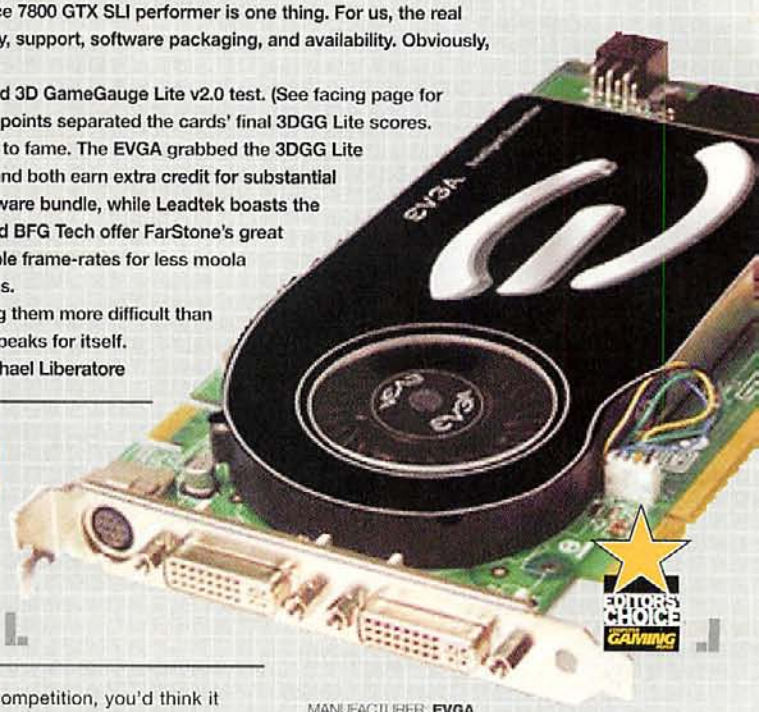
Finding out which card is the top GeForce 7800 GTX SLI performer is one thing. For us, the real winner also needs to have a good warranty, support, software packaging, and availability. Obviously, it should also cost less than the GNP of Japan.

It's no surprise that all five cards throttled through our recently upgraded 3D GameGauge Lite v2.0 test. (See facing page for an explanation of 3D GameGauge Lite v2.0.) In fact, six and a half measly points separated the cards' final 3DGG Lite scores. But despite the narrow performance spread, each card has its own claim to fame. The EVGA grabbed the 3DGG Lite performance title, while BFG Tech secured the 3DMark05 winner's spot, and both earn extra credit for substantial lifetime warranties and excellent support. Asus packs the best utility software bundle, while Leadtek boasts the best gaming bundle of the group. It's also worth noting that both Asus and BFG Tech offer FarStone's great Game Drive utility with their cards. Both Leadtek and XFX offer fast, reliable frame-rates for less moola than the others, and prices should drop even further in the coming months.

All five 7800s offer something worthwhile for gaming, which made rating them more difficult than usual. But only one card gets everything right: Asus. The five-star score speaks for itself. Tweakers, though, need to check out the EVGA board. It smokes! / Raphael Liberatore

THE "E" IS FOR EXCELLENT!

P2-N528-AX e-GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB DDR3 PCI Express GPU



MANUFACTURER: **EVGA**
PRODUCT: **P2-N528-AX e-GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express GPU**

MOST NVIDIA CARDMAKERS OFFER three versions of the 7800 GTX—entry-level vanilla, midrange with slight overclocked specs, and enthusiast-level with extreme overclocking. EVGA proves its GeForce mettle in a big way: It has the only entry-level card in this shoot-out. Unlike most of the other competitors, the e-GeForce comes out of the box with near plain-vanilla clock settings.

> EVGA PROVES ITS METTLE WITH THE ONLY ENTRY-LEVEL CARD HERE.

Compared to the competition, you'd think it would be dead last on the performance charts. On the contrary, it was our overall 3DGG Lite champ. With its 400MHz RAMDAC, high-speed GDDR3 memory, and DirectX 9.0 Shader Model 3.0 support, this racer runs slightly faster than its counterparts. The difference is especially evident in *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*. *Doom 3* frames were ultrafast and sweet looking to boot. Imagine what can be done in overclocking.

Give EVGA points for its online support and lifetime überwarranty. Add the VIVO connector for watching HDTV broadcasts or editing video, and the EVGA becomes a super choice for the gamer wanting the best GeForce 7800 GTX game muscle available. /

3D GameGauge Lite



P2-N528-AX **$549**

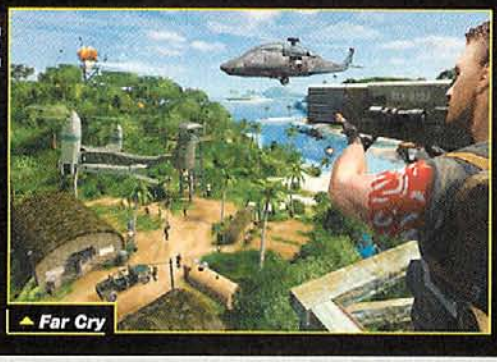
Outstanding entry-level performer.

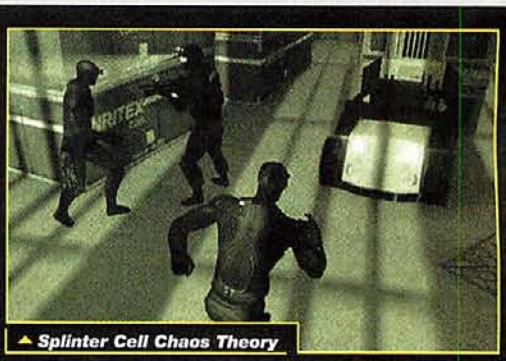
COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★★½

MAX FORCE

Pushing the limits of 3D

Crank up the settings on these two games and you'll make most computers cry—unless you're packing some Nvidia GeForce 7800 GTX heat.


▲ Far Cry


▲ Splinter Cell Chaos Theory

7800 GTX SHOWDOWN

BFG EQUALS BIG FUN GAMING

BFGR78256GTX GeForce 7800 GTX OC 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express GPU

MANUFACTURER: **BFG Tech**
PRODUCT: **BFGR78256GTX GeForce 7800 GTX OC 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express GPU**



BFG TECH HITS THE GROUND running with its overclocked GPU. Having an engine that stretches past the 425MHz mark definitely helps this card push the envelope. The proof: BFG Tech earned the fastest 3DMark05 scores of the roundup, flat-out dusting the competition. This card chews through *Doom 3* and *Far Cry* frames like they were a can of Pringles. However, it choked slightly during *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*, which greatly affected the card's overall 3DGG Lite score. Throw in FarStone's fantastic Game Drive utility in the box and this is a no-brainer.

However, this is the most expensive of the five cards reviewed. But with BFG Tech's lifetime warranty, nifty online gaming portal, and 24-hour technical support, shelling out a little more dough for performance is not that hard to swallow. It's not like any of these cards are cheap. /

3D GameGauge Lite

WORST	BFGR78256GTX ▼	BEST
40	105.2	111.7

BFGR78256GTX $599

A bit more moola, but a solid card.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

REVAMPED AND UPGRADED: 3D GAMEGAUGE LITE V2.0

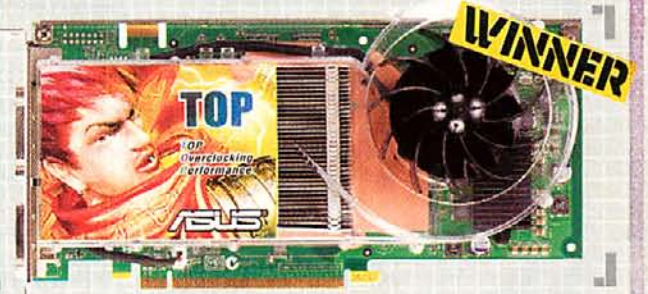
Since our 3DGG Lite benchmarking suite was getting to retirement age, we dumped *Halo* in favor of *Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil* and *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*. *Chaos Theory* pushes videocards to the limit with its cutting-edge DirectX 9.0 game engine and sports high dynamic range (HDR) rendering mode improvements via Shader Model 3.0.

When testing our videocards in SLI, each GPU goes through an exhaustive series of benchmark tests to determine overall frame-rate performance, raw speed values, and DirectX 9.0 support. Benchmarks consist of the industry's undisputed reference-quality synthetic benchmark utility, 3DMark05, and our own real-world game-test suite, 3D GameGauge Lite v2.0. 3DGG Lite consists of A-list action games such as *Far Cry*, *Unreal Tournament 2004*, and *Painkiller*. Video test resolutions are configured at 1280x1024, with 2x antialiasing and 4x anisotropic filtering enabled.

Final scores are tabulated from raw scores. It's that simple.

IT'S NOT FAT, THERE'S JUST MORE TO LOVE

EN7800GTX TOP/2DHTV/256 GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express GPU



ASUS' REPUTATION PRECEDES IT. SO even before testing this card, I expected a contender. The company's TOP enthusiast-level 7800 videocard is a little hefty, due to its rather large thermal configuration, but this bulk has a purpose. It will cool any extreme overclocking tweak you happen to set, but there's really no need to fuss. The 7800 TOP possesses serious overclocking specs right out of the box, with a ramped up 486MHz (from 435) core and 1.3MHz (from 1.2) memory clocks. Not only is it fast, but modders and Grateful Dead fans will be drawn to its psychedelic orange-yellow glow.

In game performance, the EN7800GTX TOP ranks next to the top in almost every benchmark. It posted the second-highest 3DGG Lite score, missing first place by a wee margin. It's a little pricey, but it includes a solid software bundle (including FarStone's Game Drive utility). Asus is clearly the winner of this competition. /

>> THE 7800 TOP POSSESSES SERIOUS OVERCLOCKING OUT OF THE BOX.

MANUFACTURER: **Asus**
PRODUCT: **EN7800GTX TOP/2DHTV/256 GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB GDDR3 PCI Express GPU**

3D GameGauge Lite

WORST	EN7800GTX ▼	
40	111.6	111.7

EN7800GTX $570

The clear winner of this roundup.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★★

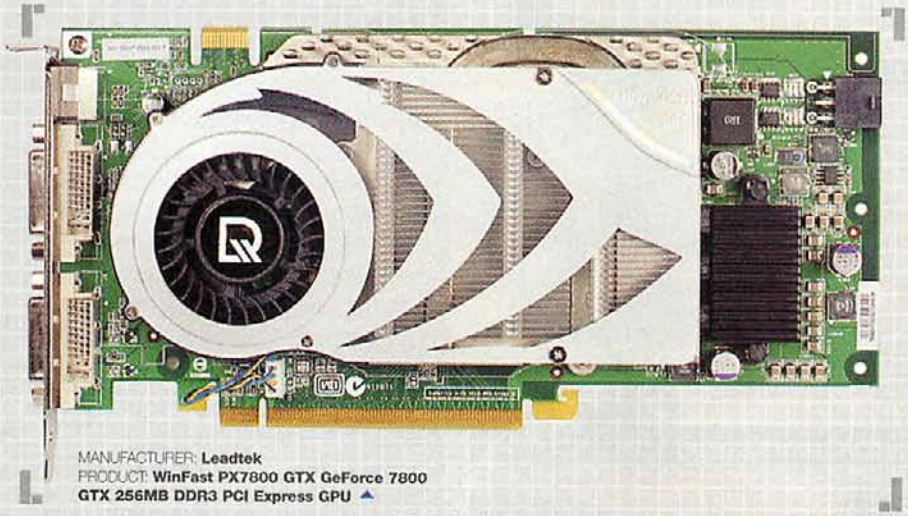
continued on page 110 >

GET THE LEAD OUT!

WinFast PX7800 GTX GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB DDR3 PCI Express GPU

LEADTEK'S WINFAST GRAPHICS BOARDS have always been top performers. So imagine my surprise when the WinFast limped across the finish line with the lowest 3DMark05 and *Far Cry* scores. At least the Leadtek card saved face in the end by performing when it was needed most in *Doom 3* and *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* testing, with both running at superb framerates. Under supersampling, *Chaos Theory* looked wonderfully detailed. When the final bell tolled, the WinFast 7800 GTX videocard netted a highly respectable 3DGG Lite score.

Leadtek offers a very good selection of games bundled with its 7800, including *Prince of Persia: Warrior Within* and—go figure—*Splinter Cell Chaos Theory*. The rest of the package includes WinFox II, along with stacks of DVD and video authoring multimedia programs. Leadtek brings plenty for the money, making it a winning combo of performance and value.



MANUFACTURER: **Leadtek**
PRODUCT: **WinFast PX7800 GTX GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB DDR3 PCI Express GPU**

LEADTEK OFFERS A GOOD SELECTION OF GAMES BUNDLED WITH ITS 7800.

3D GameGauge Lite

WORST — WINFAST PX7800 ▼ — BEST

40 | 111.0 | 111.7

WinFast PX7800 $499

Rename it: "Win Needs to Be Faster."

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★★

THE FORCE IS STRONG

PV-T70F-UNF7 GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB DDR3 PCI Express GPU

THE XFX BOARD FLIES OUT OF ITS distinct X-shaped box, overclocked and primed to light the motherboard on fire. We got a crystal-clear picture of its capabilities during the *Far Cry* portion of our 3DGG Lite benchmarking, where it blasted through every *Far Cry* map at blistering frames. Final tally: Is this right? 169?! No other card came close to the XFX in this category. On the flip side, similar to BFG Tech's card, the XFX 7800 GTX's stellar performance fizzled under duress, netting the lowest *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* score of the competition. How does this happen? *Splinter Cell*'s HDR rendering model is a killer for sure, but the XFX card stumbled big time.

XFX reclaims points for its new double lifetime warranty program. Not only are GeForce 6 series cards grandfathered into the deal, but if you donate your card to a buddy, he's covered. Crazy!

MANUFACTURER: **XFX**
PRODUCT: **PV-T70F-UNF7 GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB DDR3 PCI Express GPU**

EDITORS' CHOICE COMPUTER GAMING



THE XFX BLASTED THROUGH *FAR CRY* MAPS AT BLISTERING FRAMES.

NVIDIA'S G70 DONE RIGHT

Other than the typical speed boosts associated with a new graphics card line, Nvidia's new reference-level GeForce 7800 GTX leapfrogs past ATI with a killer GPU, the G70. Yeah, it sports some slight modifications over the 6800 Ultra, like the slightly fatter pixel shader pipes (per clock). However, the most impressive architectural feature is Nvidia's transparency adaptive antialiasing (TAAA). It improves image quality through a more elegant polygon operation utilizing either multisampling (TRMS) or higher-resolution supersampling (TRSS) technologies. By taking advantage of the 7800's beefier horsepower and utilizing the performance-heavy supersampling mode, you'll see why the G70, the heart of the 7800, is currently the best graphics card for gaming.

3D GameGauge Lite

WORST — PV-T70F-UNF7 ▼ — BEST

40 | 111.0 | 111.7

PV-T70F-UNF7 $499

Double lifetime warranty? Sold!

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

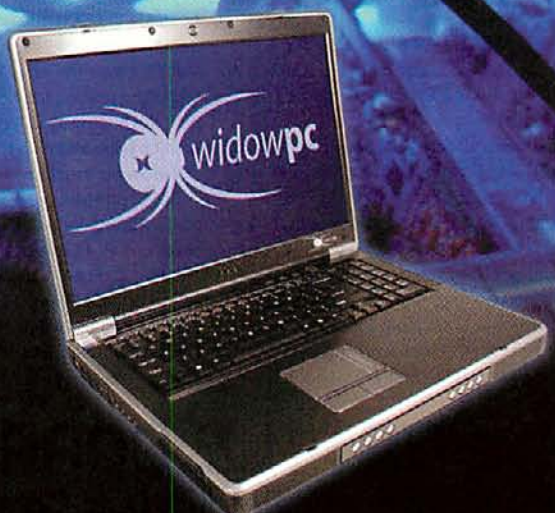
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Sting 917

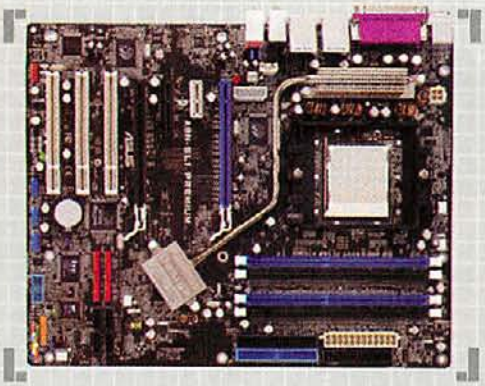
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THE KNOCKOUT PUNCH

Fatal1ty A8N SLI NForce4 PCI Express Socket 939 motherboard

MANUFACTURER: **Abit** PRODUCT: **Fatal1ty A8N SLI NForce4 PCI Express Socket 939 Motherboard**

EDITORS' CHOICE GAMING

ASUS HAS BEEN THE SLI motherboard king, but Abit has no respect for royalty. Sporting the name of pro gamer Fatal1ty on its box, Abit's AMD-based A8N SLI motherboard is packed with features and enthusiast-level performance. Hail the new king!

The A8N is an innovative board, starting with its top-notch layout. Modders will appreciate the plethora of LED lights for showing off what's under the hood. A copper chipset fan (copper dissipates heat better than aluminum) and cooling fans are placed strategically at the bottom for better heat control. The board even comes with an OTES SLIpstream video cooler fan and a front control panel prepped for monitoring temperature and overclocking settings. And thanks to the distance between the CPU and graphics cards, cooler heads—and cooler case temperatures—will prevail. However, the lack of a parallel port, coupled with tight spacing for the PCI Express slots, creates the possibility of temperature spikes if you aren't paying attention to how you're plugging components together.

Based on Nvidia's NForce4 MCP chipset for AMD, Abit's A8N includes two PCI Express x16 slots, one PCI Express x1 slot, two PCI slots, FireWire and USB 2.0 ports galore, and a native Nvidia Gigabit Ethernet controller. It also uses snugly fitted SATA II 3.0Gb/s ports for extensive RAID capabilities, and an AudioMAX daughtercard configuration for pure 7.1 surround sound in AC97. Abit also provides some of the nicest IDE cabling found in a motherboard, plus great support and comprehensive installation manuals, giving even the most green DIY builder ample backup.

NOT A BAD GIG

Johnathan "Fatal1ty" Wendel began professionally gaming in 1999. He won more than $40K that year, and has pulled down tens of thousands in gaming tournaments every year since.

Overclockers and tweakers will think they've died and gone to geek heaven. The extensive BIOS layout and uGuru utility let you adjust voltages, PCI Express clocks, DRAM frequency ratios, and CPU bus speeds.

In tests using *Doom 3* and *Splinter Cell Chaos Theory* scores were through the roof. Behold a 3DMark05 score of 11K when both the AMD Athlon FX-57 processor and a pair of XFX GeForce 7800 GTX videocards are attached to the motherboard. Indeed, you may have already seen these impressive scores in the latest desktop PC reviews—that's because all the high-end machines are flossing the A8N. **/ Raphael Liberatore**

Fatal1ty A8N SLI $195

Finally, thanks to Abit, we have a motherboard worthy of the most discriminating hardware enthusiasts.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

INTEL BATTLE BOARDS

We compare three Intel Pentium Dual-Core LGA 775 955X chipset motherboards

DO YOU KNOW THE OLD SAYING "TWO HEADS ARE BETTER than one"? It holds true for gaming hardware. Enter dual-core technology. Instead of one CPU running the show, two complete processors work in tandem to tackle more complex operations. AMD got an early lead in the dual-processing space, but now Intel is starting to fight back.

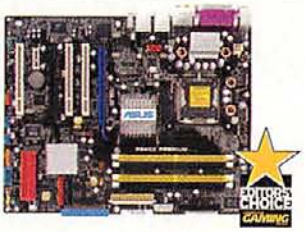
Intel's Dual-Core Pentium D Extreme Edition 840 processor with HyperTechnology is basically two 90nm Prescott 3.2GHz CPU cores located on the same die, each possessing an 800MHz FSB, 16KB L1 and 1MB L2 cache. Time to put three of the hottest Intel-based dual-core capable 955X chipset motherboards through the paces and see Intel's Pentium D CPU in action. **/ Raphael Liberatore**



1. ABIT AW8-MAX

PROCESSOR TECHNOLOGIES: **Enhanced Memory 64 technology (EM64T), enhanced Intel Speedstep technology (EIST), and XD-bit** FRONTSIDE BUS (FSB): **1066/800** RAM: **DDR2 - 8GB Max - 667/533 - dual channel** EXPANSION SLOTS: **1 PCI-Express x16, 2 PCI-Express x1, 2 PCI slots** SATA/RAID: **6x SATA-II, Dual RAID - Intel MST support, and Silicon Image PCI-E Sil3132 SATA controller** PORTS: **8 USB 2.0, 1 IEEE 1394a, and 2 IEEE 1394b ports** ONBOARD AUDIO: **7.1 AudioMAX (Intel) high-definition audio with Dolby Master Studio support** PRICE: **$222**

WHY: Similar in design to the Fatal1ty A8N SLI motherboard, this is an overclocker's dream that is fully accessible for tweaking—even during gameplay. Tons of cooling features make it more than capable of handling Intel's hot processor thresholds. The colorful design, nice cabling, and AudioMAX riser card make the AW8-MAX tops in the "modding-cool" category. There are also plenty of SATA II storage features, and the dual RAID rivals the Intel board's configuration, especially since Abit chose to include two FireWire 800Mbps ports. The AW8-MAX is one killer dual-core mobo.



2. ASUS P5WD2 PREMIUM MOTHERBOARD

PROCESSOR TECHNOLOGIES: **Enhanced Memory 64 technology (EM64T), Enhanced Intel Speedstep technology (EIST)** FRONTSIDE BUS (FSB): **1066/800/533** RAM: **DDR2 - 8GB Max - 800/667/533 - dual channel** EXPANSION SLOTS: **1 PCI-Express x16, 1 Universal PCI-Express x16/x4, 1 PCI-Express x1 (add-in card), 3 PCI slots** SATA/RAID: **4x SATA-II, Dual RAID - Intel ICH7R, MST support, and Silicon Image Sil3132 controllers** PORTS: **8 USB 2.0 and 2 IEEE 1394a ports** ONBOARD AUDIO: **7.1 ALC882D high-definition audio with Dolby Digital Live** PRICE: **$189**

WHY: With its A-list features, the P5WD2 Premium sets the bar sky-high for Intel dual-core systems. The supercharged set of overclocking utilities is primed for serious gamers. There's also extra frosting: A PCI Wi-Fi TV Edition tuner card, a great software bundle, and 800MHz DDR2 RAM support. 400Mbps FireWire is the only downer here.

PROCESSOR TECHNOLOGIES: **Enhanced Memory 64 technology (EM64T), Enhanced Intel Speedstep technology (EIST)** FRONTSIDE BUS (FSB): **1066/800/533** RAM: **DDR2 - 8GB Max - 667/533 - dual channel** EXPANSION SLOTS: **1 PCI-Express x16, 1 Universal PCI-Express x16/x4, 1 PCI-Express x1 (add-in card), 3 PCI slots** SATA/RAID: **8x SATA-II - Intel MST support** PORTS: **8 USB 2.0, 2 IEEE 1394b, and 1 IEEE 1394b ports** ONBOARD AUDIO: **7.1 Intel 82801GR high-definition audio with Dolby Master Studio support** PRICE: **$240**

WHY: Intel may have created dual-core technology, but its D955X BK is being taken to school by the cutting-edge sophistication of Asus' and Abit's boards. The D955X BK does have capable overclocking features, it's great for RAID array HDD storage capacities, and it comes with too extensive a software bundle to even list. Costing more than the Abit and Asus boards, the D955X BK just pales in comparison.

3. INTEL DESKTOP BOARD D955X BK





MANUFACTURER: **Hawking**
PRODUCT: **HBB1 Broadband Booster**

DATA SPEED DEMON

HBB1 Broadband Booster

SIMPLY PLUG HAWKING Technology's HBB1 Broadband Booster into your home network and instantly reduce lag. Sounds straightforward—and here's the big shocker: It works. Annoying lag is most commonly associated with home networks hosting multiple computers. If your ISP utilizes Quality of Service (you may need to ask your ISP), the HBB1 is perfect for you.

Service check! Check with your ISP before buying. This only works with QOS.

At the heart of the booster is Ubicom's IP3023 network processor, which eliminates data lag through the uplink via Ubicom's patented StreamEngine technology. An eight-way multithreaded 32-bit processor clocked at 250MHz automatically manages data flow without the need for you to get your hands dirty.

With StreamEngine, the Broadband Booster "shapes" networking traffic by minimizing the impact of large-packet, lower-priority transfers on latency-sensitive networks while eliminating delays caused by DSL or cable modem connections. Put into simple terms, StreamEngine manages the network by examining and classifying the data flowing out of the network. It's a nifty process in which packet transfer speeds get a boost from real-time-sensitive applications such as gaming and VoIP, and the booster is unconcerned about when or in what order it arrives at its destination.

To further remove concern is a single blinking LED to assure you the system is working. It may be another box to plug in, but at $55, the price is right for hitting fast LAN speeds without buying expensive gaming routers.

Even though there's a lot of networking mumbo jumbo going on here, what it all boils down to is this: If you're dead set on ditching lag and you're on a budget, then the HBB1 is your best bet. / **Raphael Liberatore**

HBB1 **$55**

Reduce lags and networking headaches with this smart utility.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★★★½

IF YOU'RE DEAD SET ON DITCHING LAG AND YOU'RE ON A BUDGET, THEN THE HBB1 IS YOUR BEST BET.



Tech Commando

Commo from the hardware front lines

AFTER COUNTLESS DAYS OF REBUILDING PCs, I thought nothing could intimidate me. I was wrong. Eighteen-hour days of demolishing my old kitchen and remodeling it from scratch gave me a new respect for contractors. The place will look great in a couple weeks: new maple cabinets and granite countertops, new appliances, rewired electrical outlets and lighting, and new slate for the floor. Sure, this little project costs a bundle, but by doing it myself I saved approximately $10,000 in labor. More important is that I used the excuse to upgrade to cordless power tools. Having the right tools for the job saved me gobs of time while adding precision to my kitchen remodel.

Like my cordless tools, the GeForce 7800 GTX is a great upgrade option. The 7800 is a world-class, high-end videocard designed specifically for gaming enthusiasts (especially those using SLI) willing to spend extra money for the ultimate in graphics performance. The best thing about the new 7800 series graphics card, aside from the ultracool transparency adaptive antialiasing (see roundup on p. 108), is its availability. Unlike Nvidia's 6800 series launch (finding a 6800 Ultra card was like needle-hunting in a haystack), this time Nvidia flexed its muscles and got its partners what they wanted, so supply channels could fill orders in large numbers. What a difference a year makes. The GeForce 7800 GTX is the current top-dog graphics solution for gaming, and if you read the roundup in this very issue, you'll see why I just love this beast. As *CGW*'s Tech Commando, I'm just fortunate I don't have to spend $600-plus to get one (or two for SLI). / **Raphael Liberatore**



MANUFACTURER: **Microsoft**
PRODUCT: **Wireless Optical Desktop (Multimedia Keyboard 2.0A, Optical Desktop Receiver, and Optical Mouse 2.0A)**

MICROSOFT'S MAJOR DISCONNECT

Wireless Optical Desktop (Multimedia Keyboard 2.0A, Optical Desktop Receiver, and Optical Mouse 2.0A)

MICROSOFT USUALLY MAKES SOLID hardware—"usually" being the operative word here. But the new Wireless Optical Desktop, which combines a multimedia keyboard, optical mouse, and desktop receiver, just doesn't cut it.

Hardwarewise, the Wireless Optical Desktop starts off looking like a winner. The multimedia keyboard comes jam-packed with easily accessible shortcut buttons and, like Microsoft's wired units, offers firm but quiet keystroke feedback. The optical mouse is also well conceived. It sports a tilt wheel feature for slowly moving the cursor sideways or just mapping additional *World of WarCraft* functions. Too bad few games outside of *WOW* support the tilt wheel.

As for actual performance, the mouse offers decent high-speed precision and motion for shooters. Just don't dare compare its buttons to those on the phenomenal Razer Diamondback. And that's not even mentioning Microsoft's omission of side mouse buttons. Well, OK, we'll mention it.

HELLO? IS THIS THING ON?

The real problem is that the receiver doesn't work. Microsoft claims the keyboard and mouse have longer battery life than previous hardware and can automatically detect interference and lessen radio intrusion so that you don't have to worry about interruptions. Bull. Throughout extensive testing, the keyboard and mouse experienced several pauses during gaming and nongaming operations, even with fresh batteries.

Considering we're evaluating this set for gaming, there's no reason to recommend this combo when you can easily buy Logitech's LX700. / **Raphael Liberatore**

Wireless Desktop **$50**

We've got one word for you: Logitech.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD VERDICT ★★½☆☆

MANUFACTURER: **ViewSonic**
PRODUCT: **VX924 LCD Monitor**

FLAT, FLAWED

VX924 LCD monitor

THE GAMING LCD MARKET IS GETTING mighty crowded. Still, ViewSonic manages to stand out with this sharp-looking X-series 19-inch monitor. The VX924 LCD monitor is heavy on style, sporting cool two-tone brushed-aluminum trim and a thin bezel design encased in black. Compared to the blah-black cases out there, the VX924 is a looker. Fortunately, that beauty is more than just skin deep.

The VX924 delivers what gamers crave in an LCD monitor. With ultrafast response times, the VX924 plows through 3D-intensive games like *SWAT 4* and *Half-Life 2* with nary a jaggie or ghosting. Rated at 3ms, the VX924 owns the fastest LCD response time of any consumer monitor to date—a benefit that shooter fans will definitely enjoy. Put it all together, with its hypersonic 4ms response rate, 550:1 contrast ratio, proprietary OptiSync input controller, sync-on-green, and XtremeView ultrawide 160-degree viewing angle technologies, coupled with a 270 cd/m2 contrast ratio, and the VX924 screams gaming.

So if this is such a great monitor, why only 3.5 stars? With all of its game-enhancement genius, the VX924's image gets tarnished by a couple of engineering snafus. For one, the lack of height adjustment is just plain dumb. If you're considering this monitor, make sure your chair is adjustable, especially if you have trouble meeting roller-coaster height requirements. A lack of software-monitor adjustment tools is also annoying, but I can live with this shortcoming.

Both are minor quibbles when compared to a larger concern: how the VX924 handles color and uniformity. I noticed this problem while looking at the richly colored environmental palette of Blizzard's *World of WarCraft*—the VX924 showed slight color variations from top to bottom. The image at the top of the monitor appeared duller than the bottom image; this problem was even more evident when I compared the same screen location on a nearby NEC-Mitsubishi 1970GX.

Despite some color and uniformity flaws, ViewSonic has delivered a solid, good-looking



LCD gaming monitor. Game performance is exceptional, so it's a good choice for shooter fans who haven't taken the LCD plunge yet. / Raphael Liberatore

VX924 LCD **$499**

A high-quality LCD that's a looker.

COMPUTER GAMING WORLD **VERDICT** ★★★½☆

A-LIST

***Computer Gaming World*'s A-List is an all-star compendium of computer components and devices for gaming. It covers plenty of territory, from high-performance top-of-the-line products to mainstream gear.**

CPUS

Best Performance Processor
AMD Athlon 64 FX-57 2.8GHz CPU
(AMD - www.amd.com - $1,015)

Best Performance Dual-Core Processor
AMD Athlon 64 X2 4800+ 2.4GHz CPU
(AMD - www.amd.com - $960)

Best Budget Processor
AMD Athlon 64 3500+ 2.2GHz "Venice" 90nm CPU
(AMD - www.amd.com - $219)

MOTHERBOARDS

Best Performance Motherboard
Asus A8N-SLI Premium NForce4 Socket 939 motherboard
(Asus - www.asus.com - $175)

Best Budget Motherboard
Chaintech VNF4 Ultra Zenith VE NForce4 Socket 939 Ultra motherboard (Chaintech - www.chaintechusa.com - $89)

GRAPHICS CARDS

Best Performance Graphics Card for AGP
ATI Radeon X850 XT Platinum Edition AGP 256MB GDDR3 videocard (ATI Technologies - www.ati.com - $549)

Best Performance Graphics Card for PCI Express
XFX Nvidia GeForce 7800 GTX PCI Express 256MB GDDR3 videocard (XFX - www.xfxforce.com - $559)

Best Budget Videocard
BFG Tech GeForce 6600 GT OC 128MB GDDR3 videocard (BFG Tech - www.bfgtech.com - $145)

RAM

Best Performance DDR RAM
Corsair XMS TwinX1024-4400 1GB 550MHz 1024MB DDR RAM kit (Corsair - www.corsairmicro.com - $539)

Best Performance DDR2 RAM
Corsair XMS2 Twin2X1024A-8000UL 800MHz 1024MB DDR2 RAM kit (Corsair - www.corsairmicro.com - $280)

Best Budget DDR RAM
Kingston HyperX KHX3500A/512 434MHz 512MB DDR433 PC3500 kit (Kingston - www.kingston.com - $232)

HARD DRIVES

Best Performance Internal Hard Drive
Deskstar 7K500 500GB 7,200 rpm SATA II NCQ HDD
(Hitachi - www.hitachi.com - $290)

Best Performance External Hard Drive
FireWire 400 250GB hard drive designed by FA Porsche
(LaCie - www.lacie.com - $199)

MONITORS

Best LCD
Dell 2405FPW 24-inch LCD monitor
(Dell - www.dell.com - $1,299)

Best Budget LCD
NEC-Mitsubishi MultiSync 1970GX 19-inch LCD monitor
(NEC-Mitsubishi - www.necdisplay.com - $359)

Best CRT
NEC MultiSync FE2111SB-BK 22-inch CRT monitor
(NEC - www.necdisplay.com - $559)

SOUND

Best Soundcard
Creative Sound Blaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro soundcard (Creative Labs - www.creative.com - $249)

Best Budget Soundcard
Mad Dog Entertainer 7.1 DSP soundcard
(Mad Dog - www.mdmm.com - $79)

Best Speaker System
Logitech Z-5500 Digital 5.1 speakers
(Logitech - www.logitech.com - $400)

Best Budget Speaker System
GigaWorks ProGamer G500 5.1 speaker system
(Logitech - www.logitech.com - $250)

Best Headphones
Zalman ZM-RS6F headphones
(Zalman - www.zalmanusa.com - $42)

GAME DEVICES/PERIPHERALS

Best Gaming Mouse (tie)
Razer Diamondback Optical Mouse
(Razer - www.razerzone.com - $59)

Logitech MX 518 Gaming-Grade Optical Mouse
(Logitech - www.logitech.com - $49)

Best Mouse Pad
Steelpad 4D mouse pad
(Soft Trading - www.steelpad.com - $29)

Best Gaming Keyboard
Gamers Keyboard (Saitek - www.saitek.com - $59)

Best Wireless Keyboard-Mouse Combo
Logitech Cordless Desktop MX 3100
(Logitech - www.logitech.com - $129)

Best Joystick
CH Products Fighterstick USB
(CH Products - www.chproducts.com - $149)

Best Gamepad
Logitech Cordless Rumblepad 2
(Logitech - www.logitech.com - $40)

Best Racing Wheel
Logitech MOMO Racing Wheel
(Logitech - www.logitech.com - $89)

NETWORKING

Best Gaming Router
DGL-4300 GamerLounge Wireless 108G Gaming Router
(D-Link - www.d-link.com - $159)

Best Switch
SMC8508T EZ Switch 10/100/1000 Gigabit 8-port Unmanaged Switch (SMC - www.smc.com - $119)

Best Network Adapter
Belkin Pre-N Notebook Network Card (Belkin - www.belkin.com - $110)

GAMING NOTEBOOKS

Best Performance Notebook
Dell Inspiron XPS Gen 2 notebook
(Dell - www.dell.com - $2,400)

Best Budget Notebook
Vigor Gaming Artorius notebook
(Vigor Gaming - www.vigorgaming.com - $1,629)

EXTREMETECH

TECH MEDICS

ExtremeTech.com's Jason Cross would like you to cough now

I'VE JUST ORDERED A NEW TOP-OF-THE-line Mach V Exotix gaming PC from Falcon Northwest with an Athlon 64 FX-57, but now I'm having second thoughts about my choice of CPU. Would the X2 4800+ be a better buy than the FX-57 in the long run? All the stuff I've been reading about the coming of multithreaded games and multithreaded drivers from Nvidia is making me think that the FX-57 might turn out to be a bad choice if, in a few months, videocard drivers can take advantage of the dual-core CPUs. I won't feel very good if all of a sudden the X2 4800+ is able to wipe the floor with the FX-57 in most current and older games. And it looks like the big multithreaded game engine everyone is waiting for is the next *Unreal Tournament* engine.

Richard D. Ryan

Since you're running a couple of 7800 GTX cards in SLI, don't look for dual-core-optimized drivers from Nvidia to give you much of a speed boost at all. Real gains will only come from some of the geometry assists that Nvidia's drivers do on CPUs, and that mostly benefits midlevel and low-end videocards. All the really cool games are limited by pixel shader processing ability, memory bandwidth, and the like. Having said that, many games are limited by CPU power, and with all the physics middleware and game engines moving to take advantage of multicore CPUs (thanks to multicore next-gen consoles and future PC CPUs), the day will come when dual core matters a lot.

There won't be games that benefit much from dual core in the next few months. Don't expect to see many games that take advantage of dual core until well into 2006. Right now, be happy that you have one of the fastest gaming machines you can buy, and worry about replacing your CPU with a dual-core chip in a year or two when it will really make a difference.

I got a Dell computer about a year ago and decided that I should upgrade the videocard. I currently have a Radeon X300, a PCI Express card. Is a Radeon 9600 or 9800 better than my X300? Because a friend said that he could get me a Radeon 9600 for cheap. I don't really want to spend over $400 on the videocard.

Max Chauhan

Well, a Radeon 9600 would be better than your X300, but you can't use one. There are no PCI Express versions of the 9600, only AGP, and you need a PCIe videocard. What you're looking for is a Radeon X600 or X800, both of which would be a big improvement for modern games. Since your budget is less than $400, I would advise you to hang on for a couple of months if you can manage. ATI and Nvidia should both come out with new midrange graphics technologies in the fall for well under $400, and they'll surely be a nice leap over the moderately priced cards of today. If you have to buy now, look at the Radeon X700 and X800 cards from ATI or the GeForce 6600 GT or 6800 cards from Nvidia.

OK, I've recently fallen in love with the game *World of WarCraft*. There's only one problem: I get lag so bad that it takes about a minute to get to the graveyard screen (which really hurts in Warsong Gulch). My computer just barely meets the minimum requirements, and I have Cox high-speed Internet. What single thing could I do that would lessen this problem the most?

Matthew Breeden

It sounds like you have a decent cable modem connection, which should make it easy enough to enjoy the game the way it's meant to be played. So what you have is not "lag" (network latency). You have other computer performance problems. Gamers often confuse lag—slow network response caused by the game servers or your Net connection—with poor PC performance (bad framerate, slow loading times, and so on).

So what can you do? If you barely meet the minimum system requirements, make sure you turn down all your video options in the game menu. Don't run programs in the background while you play *WOW*. Defrag your hard drive. Definitely run an up-to-date virus scan and spyware scan to make sure your system resources aren't being sucked up by nasty programs you don't even know you're running! And make sure your video, audio, and system drivers are up to date.

Unfortunately, this probably won't solve the really long loading you're experiencing to get to the graveyard screen. You'll probably notice that your hard drive is accessing furiously during this time. The best thing you can do is upgrade your RAM: Massively multiplayer games like *WOW* run best with 512MB or 1GB of RAM. Or just try not to die so often.

Got questions? *Send them to Tech_Medics@ziffdavis.com*

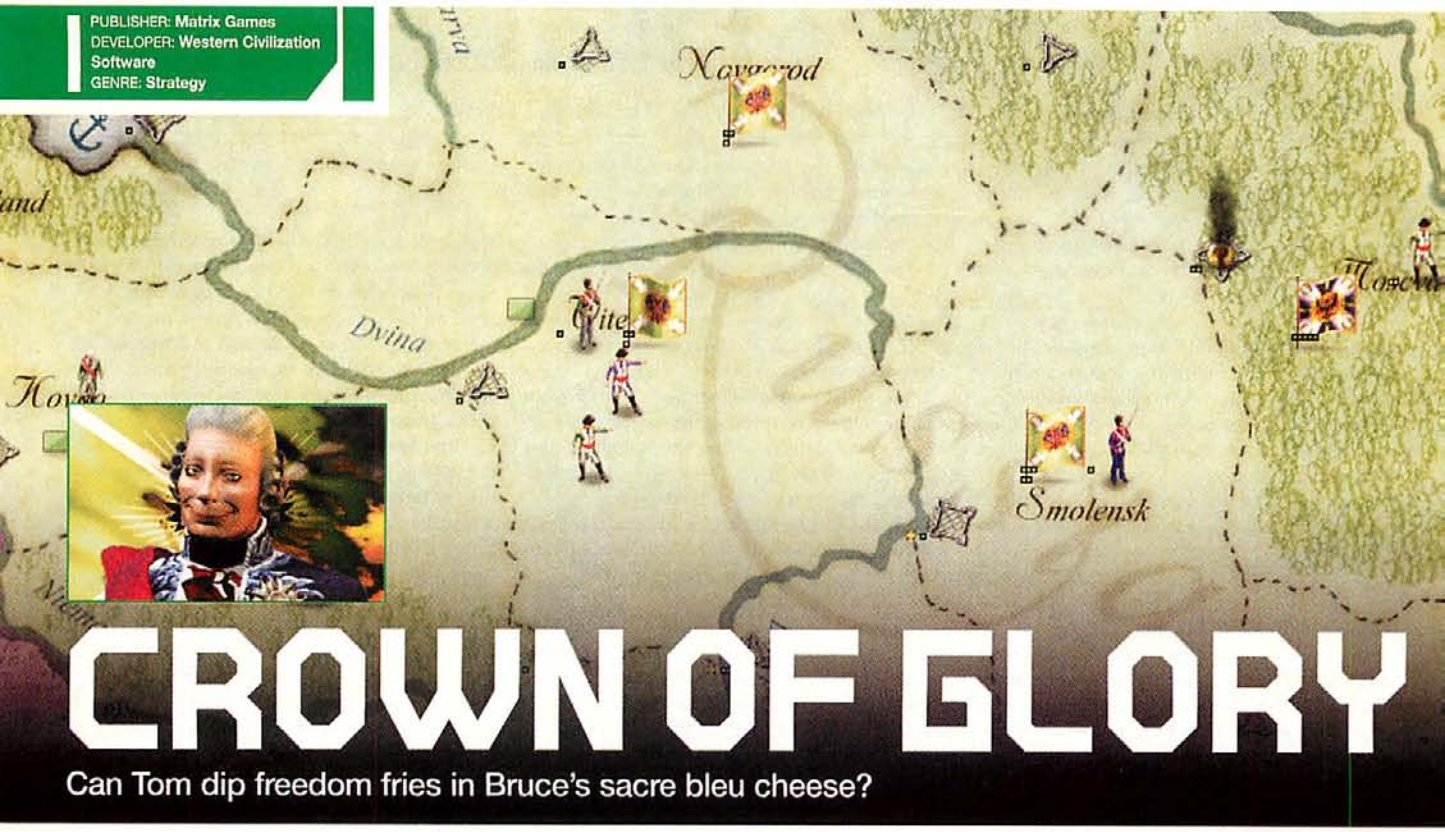
THE BEST THING YOU CAN DO IS UPGRADE YOUR RAM. OR JUST TRY NOT TO DIE SO OFTEN.



▲ MANUFACTURER: **ATI**
PRODUCT: **Radeon X800**

TOM vs. BRUCE

PUBLISHER: Matrix Games
DEVELOPER: Western Civilization Software
GENRE: Strategy



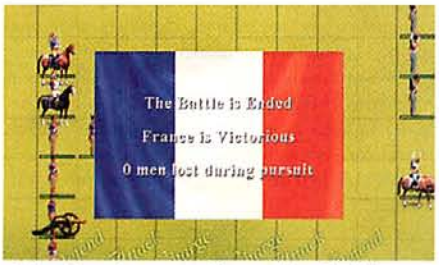
CROWN OF GLORY

Can Tom dip freedom fries in Bruce's sacre bleu cheese?

WE KNOW IT'S BEEN JUST THREE MONTHS since we last played a turn-based historical war game, but as part of our continuing effort to woo the rest of Bill Trotter's former readers away from *PC Gamer*, we're playing another one this month, *Crown of Glory*. In the 1805 scenario, Bruce is playing as France, Tom is playing as Russia, and everyone else is the A.I. The first player to amass 1,000 glory wins.

1805

Tom: You might have thought that Napoleonics is the study of short people. So imagine your embarrassment when Bruce suggests a Napoleonics game and you call dibs on the hobbits, or the Oompa Loompas if Electronic Arts has an exclusive deal with the hobbit franchise. Imagine, then, your disappointment upon discovering that Napoleonics is actually the study of men who wear bad hats and line up in neat formations to shoot at each other. I'm not necessarily saying this happened to me. But I do want to make it clear that a lesser magazine would take this opportunity to make all sorts of jokes about Bruce being a cheese-eating surrender monkey because he's playing as France. I like to think we're above that sort of thing.



▲ **The French are used to running, but they can't catch any Russians while in pursuit.**



▲ **It's hard to tell, since this game doesn't use the *Unreal 3* engine, but it's raining in Turkey.**



▲ **You sank my battleship!**

Bruce: *Crown of Glory* is a war game about the Napoleonic era, with a complex strategic layer that makes *Rome: Total War* look like *Riskus Romanus*. The 1805 scenario doesn't involve a lot of economic management since the main countries are already developed and primed for war. However, *Crown of Glory*'s two-player game has some serious issues that Tom and I will have to fight through. Pun totally intended.

There are two key stats in this game: national morale and glory. These come from fighting battles, surrendering, controlling designated "political goal" provinces, and having avant-garde plays and poetry readings, which are represented by your culture score. A game that glorifies intellectual foppery—that has to be a first.

Tom: The best parts of *Crown of Glory* play a bit like Frog City's *Imperialism* games.

> IF YOU WANT TO FIND OUT HOW SMART PRUSSIA IS, GO LOOK FOR IT ON A MAP. GO AHEAD, I'LL WAIT.

players



Tom Chick
In addition to being one of the videogame industry's most prolific freelance journalists, Tom also runs the popular website QuarterToThree.com.



Bruce Geryk
When he's not writing about nerdy war games, Bruce Geryk spends his days putting a hard-earned medical degree to good use.

Unfortunately, these same parts also play a bit like Quicksilver's *Master of Orion III*. Welcome to the sometimes cool/usually stupid strategic layer! While we're doing some nifty 19th-century wheeling and dealing to lay a latticework of diplomatic interactions over Europe, we also have to futz with inscrutable slider bars and wonder why we have so many textiles sitting around in our warehouses. No joke. This game has textiles like you wouldn't believe. Need a bolt of cloth? Come on down to *Crown of Glory*!

Bruce: Remember how I said the two-player game has some issues? One of them is the totally goofy A.I. To wit: Since the A.I. controls Prussia, offering the Prussians "free passage" through my territories is enough to get them to declare war on Russia—a completely idiotic move, especially considering that free passage through my territories is totally useless to them. But in exchange for nonexclusive vacation rights in Languedoc (which is also a kind of cheese), the Prussians are totally willing to freeze their asses off in Russia. Sounds good to me!

While my diplomats are engaged in these machinations, I need to get my war machine in motion. At the beginning of the game, France is the only nation that can move corps independently, which is a serious historical simulation of Napoleon being, like, a total genius. I need to redeploy my troops to the south and whip the Austrians before they can link up with the reinforcements that Tom will eventually send from Mother Russia.

Tom: You know how someone in *Battlefield 2* will rush ahead in a dune buggy instead of waiting for his teammates to get in with him? From now on, I'm going to call this move "pulling an Austria," because that's exactly what Austria has done. Those lone-wolfing idiots decided to have their own battle in Bavaria instead of waiting for me to link up with them, which I was totally on my way to do.

Bruce: The first big battle happens in Bavaria, with 100,000 Austrians taking on 90,000 French. We're resolving battles by quick combat rather than in the tactical war game mode so that this game doesn't take two years to finish. This means that, given French leadership advantages, it's going to take a lot of Austrians to slow down my steamroller. Eight wonderful glory to the French.

Tom: I'm being attacked by some place called Prussia. If you want to find out how smart Prussia is, go look for it on a map. Go ahead, I'll wait. Are you back yet? You couldn't find it, could you? You know why? Because it's gone. That's what happens to countries clueless enough to take orders from France and attack another country that's not even bothering them. Not that the Prussians pose any great threat to me. By prematurely building a string of depots to its destination, the A.I. does a great job of telling me exactly what it's going to do long before it does it. So the geniuses running Prussia kindly draw the 19th-century equivalent of a neon arrow to Moscow using a line of expensive and unnecessary depots. To which I respond by easily knocking out the first one, in Grodno, rendering the rest of them useless.



▲ **France rakes in the glory on this army report. But what do they spend it on? Cheese! Again!**



▲ **Looks like an episode of *Trading Spaces*.**



▲ **The Russian navy rules the Baltic. Yay!**



▲ **If only our own economic advisors had fancy sliders like this. We'd all be rich!**

1806

Bruce: Fouché is my spy in the east, and right now he shows a Prussian army sitting in Smolensk in the middle of a snowstorm. That can't be good for Prussian supply. More importantly, the Austrians concentrated forward and tried moving into Switzerland. My advance guard lost a couple small battles, but the later large ones were never in doubt. I won a particularly big battle against both Austria and Russia, which gained me 32 glory.

Tom: As sure as you'll get the message "dumbass666 [LAW] anygivenplayer" after dumbass666 runs off in his dune buggy in *Battlefield 2*, I get the following message about Austria: "Your ally Austria has surrendered to France."

Bruce: Peace terms are crucial here. I take the provinces of Tyrolia and Carniola, which are French political objectives and will gain me two extra glory per turn. Over a 40-turn game, that's 80 glory. I also got the Austrians to give me 20 percent of their income for a whole year and to agree not to attack me for a few months. I actually want them to attack me again at some point, because that means I will be able to make them surrender, netting me another 120 glory. Maybe I can farm the Austrians for glory.

Tom: Now to get the Prussians to surrender. I force them into a few sizable battles and grind their armies down. Based on my decisive victories, I've determined that the Prussians are probably lazy, stupid, shiftless, bad at math, and unable to drive worth a damn. Since there's no longer any such thing as a Prussian, I can safely say this without offending anyone.

Bruce: While I was taking down Austria, Britain landed an expeditionary force in Brittany and actually captured Brest! That did wonders for my national morale (-150 for a captured city). Plus, they reinforced with more troops, and with Austria out of the way, Napoleon came back and forced pretty much the whole force to sur-

LAST MONTH...

We discovered there's someone even worse than Ryan Scott at flying helicopters in *Battlefield 2*. Who? That would be Bruce.



▲ **Britain invades Denmark?**

render. It was like a rehearsal for Dunkirk, but without the part where they're valiantly ferried across the Channel. It's going to take Britain a long time to get those troops back because it'll have to build divisions from scratch.

Tom: Like Richard Simmons, the Prussians are easy enough to hold back but hard to beat into submission. I just found out that they have a whole other army. Apparently, the Prussians researched "reserves." So I make peace with them by paying them off. Too bad they won't accept textiles, because I'm sitting on a ton of the stuff. I promise not to attack them for a year, which lets me convince them that they should try their luck beating up on Bruce.

Bruce: After a year as my ally, Prussia has cancelled our alliance and declared war on me, apparently at Russia's behest (according to the treaty report). That's actually great, because now I can invade Prussia.

1807

Bruce: When you're playing as France, invading Prussia is trivially easy because Batavia (the Netherlands) is your protectorate. Drop a small depot chain in there and you can operate in full supply as long as you can afford it. I cranked my military readiness down a bit after defeating Austria and shutting down the British invasion, so I've built up a nice pile of cash. Two huge battles in Brandenburg net me almost 50 glory. A few turns besieging Berlin drops the Prussian morale enough to force a surrender. My glory is over 600.

Tom: Apparently, I managed to weaken the Prussians enough so that Bruce could quickly convince them to surrender. It's like those times you try to open a jar of jelly that's been sitting in the fridge. You grunt and struggle to no avail, only to have your girlfriend easily pop the lid off because you loosened it first.

Bruce: The Prussian surrender puts me in an interesting position. There are no provinces that gain me any political objectives, so I need to decide if I'm going to invade Russia. If I re-create the Grand Duchy of Warsaw, I get a protectorate where I can start my depot supply chain. That costs me a lot of points (to get Prussia to cede five provinces!), so I can't get other things out of this, such as money or enforced peace.

Tom: Time to get me some glory. Bruce created a protectorate out of Poland, and I'm about to unprotect it. Cue the montage of battle scenes with me in the background looking noble and determined!

Bruce: Tom got the jump on me and laid siege to Warsaw. But my whole army is close by, and when the French are operating in supply,



▲ **The game actually keeps track of POWs, but since you can't free them or eliminate them, you have to put them in a low-supply province and starve them. Yeah, we thought it was sick, too.**

they're very tough. I taught two Russian armies the dangers of exporting Pan-Slavism west of the Dvina. Fourteen glory to me, and I'm on the road to Moscow.

Tom: Cue the montage of retreat scenes with me in the background looking surprised and baffled!

Bruce: Here is where *Crown of Glory* isn't such a good Napoleonic war game: If you can just sit in an enemy's capital, you can pretty much force him to surrender. Not to get all preachy-preach History Man on your asses, but Napoleon sat in Moscow for a month and it did him less good than Terrell Owens' holdout. In this game, as long as you occupy the enemy capital, morale will plummet and the czar will eventually agree to pay TO whatever he wants.

Tom: My national morale is at -300, but I'm not terribly concerned with approval ratings. Let them eat borscht. I'm busy beating up on the French.

Bruce: I spend three months in Moscow watching my army melt away as Tom's Cossacks very effectively break down my supply chain. However, he can't manage to win a decisive battle, and his morale ends up just giving out.

1808

Tom: Bruce has forced me to surrender by basically camping his troops in Moscow while I run around and actually win battles. Who knew bivouacking was more important than actually fighting? It seems that Spain and Turkey are also really good at bivouacking, because they both have more glory than me. I hereby dub this game *Nightcap of Glory*.

The problem here is that you really have to cooperate to defeat France, which is something Europe doesn't do well when it's run by half-baked A.I., much less actual European leaders. So Bruce got to play the A.I. like the war-gaming puppet master that he is while I lurked harmlessly on the eastern edge of the map and tussled with Prussians.

Bruce: Actually, supply is (or was) probably the single most important consideration in Napoleonic combat. The problem is that this game doesn't penalize you enough for being way, way out of supply like my troops were in Russia. Napoleon's army disintegrated in less than a month after he left Moscow, but I've happily sat here for several turns with no depots, defeating every Russian army that tries to dislodge me.

Tom: Bruce is within spitting distance of the win and there are Austrians amassing for an attack, which will be followed by their surrender, which will handily tip Bruce over 1,000 glory. How can I get the A.I. to not attack? I need to quickly research the United Nations and pass a resolution for the Austrians to chill the f*** out. Unfortunately, *Crown of Glory*'s economics are mainly about stockpiling textiles.

Bruce: Austria hates me. Austria wants war. In fact, Austria wants war so much that it gave me a casus belli by loading all of its army into adjacent territories. This gives me an excuse to declare war with no glory loss. Here we go again! I swing my two main armies south from Flanders and force three big battles this turn. I win all three. Tom is in the unfortunate position of watching the A.I. give the game away to me.

Tom: One of the recurring problems in Tom vs. Bruce articles is that anytime we want some sort of multilateral gaming experience, either Erik Wolpaw comes in and writes stuff much funnier than ours or the A.I. serves as a spoiler. And when you consider how horrible *Crown of Glory*'s strategic A.I. is, I don't consider this a loss for me so much as a win for bad A.I.

Bruce: The second Austrian surrender takes me to well over 900 glory, and a few more turns of doing nothing but collecting points for stuff that doesn't require me to do anything will put me over the top.

Tom: The pièce de résistance here—note that I'm having to use little Frenchisms now that Napoleon Geryk has pretty much conquered the world—is that the denouement of this mise-en-scène wasn't due to Bruce's superior esprit de corps. Mais non! Instead, the coup de grâce was simply the bonne chance of the pomme de terre A.I., tromping le monde in a veritable cirque du soleil of je ne c'est pas. Que est ce que c'est. At any rate, the cheese-eating surrender monkey wins. C'est la guerre.

France wins in May 1808. Due to all that cheese eating, Tom and Bruce battle a severe bout of lactose intolerance.

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HUXLEY

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F.E.A.R. TRAILER

Check out the trailer of this survival-horror-influenced first-person shooter and watch for our review in an upcoming issue.



STUBBS THE ZOMBIE TRAILER

See Stubbs fight humans and convert them into zombies as he exacts his revenge in this '50s-noir-inspired action game.

TOTAL OVERDOSE TRAILER

Mix *From Dusk Till Dawn* with *Kill Bill*, then go waaay over the top from there. Seriously. Check it out in this trailer.

PRINCE OF PERSIA 3 TRAILER

The Prince is back—and the Prince is bad. Take a peek at the game promising to blend the best elements of the last two *Prince of Persia* games.

FABLE: THE LOST CHAPTERS TRAILER

Fable arrives on the PC with expanded content, greater customization, new quests, and enhanced graphics. You'll find our review on page TK.

BLACK & WHITE 2 TRAILER

Will *Black & White 2* "revolutionize both real-time strategy and God games," as Molyneux and gang claim? See it in this trailer, and read our preview on page TK.

X-MEN LEGENDS II: RISE OF APOCALYPSE TRAILER

An action-RPG about the X-Men? Sign us up!

BIG MONEY SHAREWARE

Surprisingly addictive, this little game proves that greed is good.

TOM CLANCY'S SPLINTER CELL CHAOS THEORY MAP

Check out the first official multiplayer map from Ubisoft, featuring indoor and outdoor maps!

BATTLEFIELD 2 MOD EDITOR (BETA)

Get creative with the *Battlefield 2* engine with this mod editor from the good folks at EA Games.

THE SIMS 2: NIGHTLIFE TRAILER

The Sims get their groove on in this trailer for *The Sims 2: Nightlife*!

THE SIMS 2 DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

Check out this exclusive song for *The Sims 2*. Just load this *CGW* remix and watch your Sims dance the night away!

BLACK & WHITE 2 SPELL VIDEOS

Get a look at some of the spells you can cast in Molyneux's latest game.

LUXOR SHAREWARE

The good folks at Reflexive Arcade offer up some ancient Egyptian puzzle action.

VARIOUS TOOLS

Enjoy some nifty tools we found on the Web. Aren't we thoughtful?

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BAD FOR BUSINESS

Anyone up for some *CornHole*? Hello? Is this on?

I RECENTLY INSTALLED AND PLAYED *MOJO MASTER* because, apparently, I am filled with self-loathing. *Mojo Master* successfully blends *Magic: The Gathering*, *Singles*, and a desperate cry for help into a gaming experience that isn't so much bad as it is horrible. But you can't exactly blame the game for its overwhelming crapitude—after all, it was created as a promotional gimmick for Axe Body Spray. In the alternate hellscape universe of this dating game, Axe Body Spray is a potent power-up instead of a substance that will make you smell like a strip club bathroom attendant's worn and spattered Hush Puppies. If you're capable of making that cognitive leap, then OK, maybe you can eke a little enjoyment out of conning digital vixens into dating you with the sub-middle-school double entendres that pass for wit in *Mojo Master*.

Then again, *Mojo Master* just might be the Noel Coward of corporate gaming. After playing—I'm sorry, enduring—*Mojo Master*, I took a quick spin around the Internet to see what other corporations had to offer in the way of games. Most corporate websites indeed feature some sort of gaming, most of it incredibly bad Shockwave mouse clickers that effectively whittle away a few of the minutes between now and your inevitable death with the added benefit of a special sneak preview of what purgatory might be like.

Take, for instance, the entertainment Coca-Cola provides at mycoke.com—it's all New Coke–caliber bad. For example, *MyCoke Recycler* cunningly captures the special tedium of fetching tools for an irrational factory foreman. "Bring me the Poofs!" it commands. "Bring me the planks!" it orders. First off, what the hell are Poofs? And why are planks going in my soda? Uh-oh! Be careful—one wrong step and you might get incinerated by molten steel! Or electrocuted! Sweet Moby Dick, is this the same company that wanted to teach the world to sing? Another game, *MyCoke Coaster*, seems a more natural fit until you play it and discover that instead of promoting responsible beverage-cozy usage, *Coaster* is a sequence-memorizing game that charges you with getting a roller-coaster car to the top of the rails. Coke—the beverage of one-armed, bail-skipping carnies.

Unlike Coke, the Pepsi.com entertainment isn't designed by monkeys fed a steady diet of peyote and psilocybin. (I'll pause here to note that while I don't know how to spell "psilocybin," *Microsoft Word* does. Make of that what you will.) Instead, Pepsi.com pimps its products not through bad games but personality tests, albeit tests packed with wild, wacky, eXXtreme 'tude. Through this no doubt rigorously scientific process, I am matched as an ideal Pepsi Twist drinker because when confronted with naming a hypothetical band, I opt for The Plastic Tart over choices such as Seventeen Sprain because The Plastic Tart was merely stupid as opposed to incredibly stupid, and because my real dream band name, Crawlspace Cowboy, wasn't an option.

You'd think that such huge corporations would have the wherewithal to create better-quality content. Sadly, they don't. These games don't do anything to enhance their parent brands, and some aggressively degrade them. Like McDonald's games. The company created those playgrounds at its obesity-dispensation centers in order to hook younger consumers, so surely its website is chock-full of fun for the youngsters, right? Wrong. The only real game I could find consisted of trying to click on a flitting Big Mac that shed lettuce and taunted me by declaring "MY BUNS DEMAND BOTH HANDS!" While this very phrase is doubtlessly useful in negotiating salary increases (yes, I'm looking at you, Ryan "Mr. Moneybags" Scott), its efficacy as a slogan related to a greasy food product is, at best, questionable. Your buns demand both hands? Of course they do, fat ass.

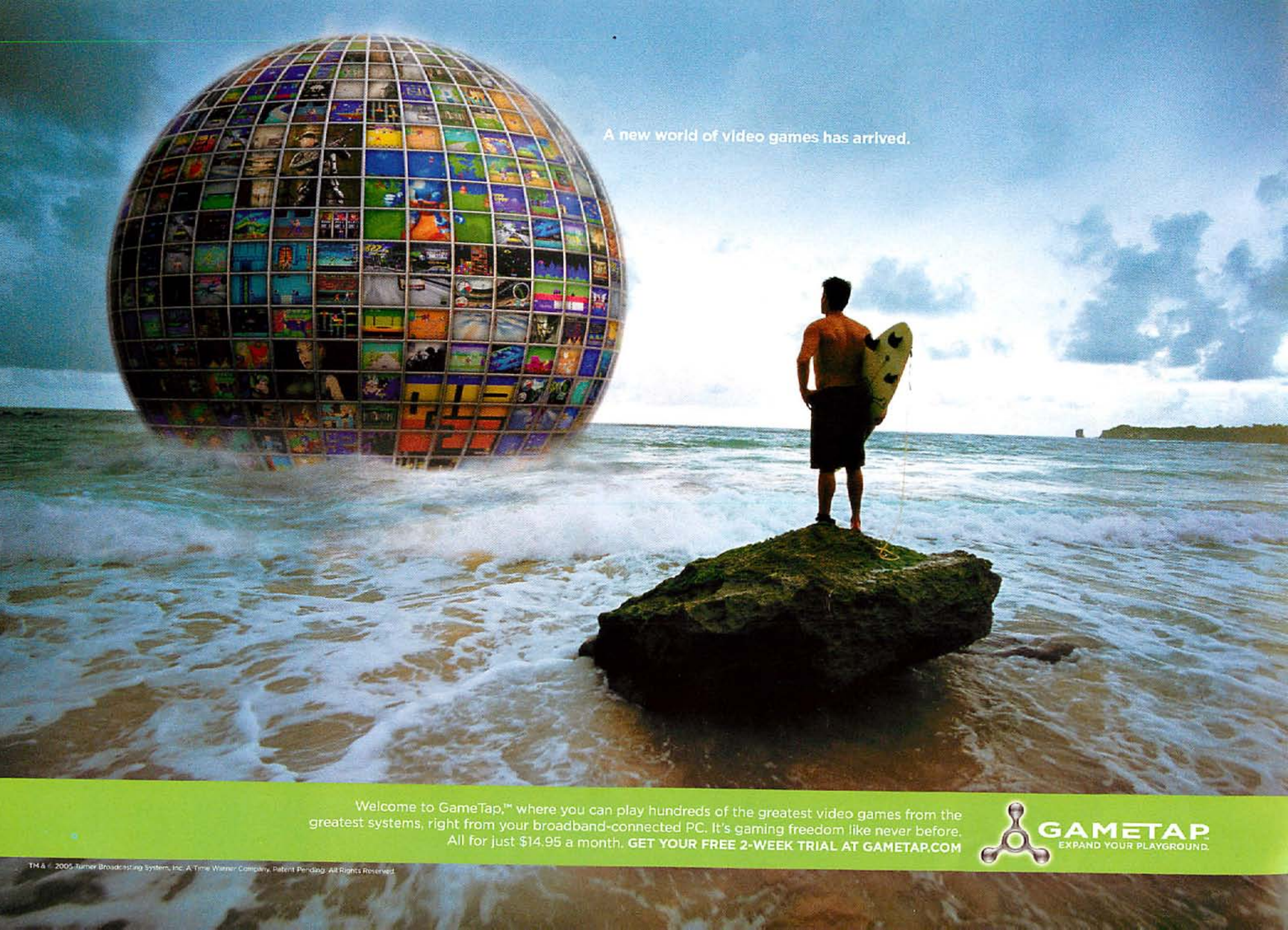


MY BUNS DEMAND BOTH HANDS!

Some companies seem to worry if their Web visitors are even up to the task of gaming. Take Preparation H—its website proffers a leisurely '50s-style quiz show in lieu of anything too taxing or lively because, y'know, odds are if you're visiting the Preparation H website you've already got enough aggravation. As you'd expect, Preparation H is all about the end result, and after you've wrestled with whimsical hemorrhoid humor in the form of multiple choice answers that postulate "Hemorrhoids often occur with birthday parties," you've laughed a little, you've loved a little, and you've learned a lot—about swollen rectal veins.

Yet the most unsettling diversion and definitive proof that businesses have no business in the game business comes courtesy of Nabisco. Journey to nabiscoworld.com/games and you'll discover the unfortunately named *CornHole*, an innocuous enough little recreation yet the most badly named recreation since, um, Scab Nibbling. Short of finding a rat bottled in your soda, *CornHole*, with its subtle visual of a big, dark, round hole cut into a board, is the most inept brand enhancer ever, successfully linking snack chips with (at best) outhouses and (at worst) a little spot on the body which should avoid birthday parties at all costs. Bon appétit! / **Robert Coffey**

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